



belgian review

the contemporary theatre

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theatre
in Belgium

The Dutch-language theatre

ITS ORIGIN

In all countries where the drama had an early start, it owed its origin to ritual acts or religious ceremonies, as was the case in Greece, China and Japan. The same process took place in the Flemish country (i.e. the Dutch-language area of Belgium), where the theatre owed its roots to religion.

The rich and varied rites of Christianity, which penetrated deeply in the low-lying regions of the Scheldt and the Meuse, provided the subject matter for visual presentations of dogmas and especially of facts and tales culled from the Christian faith. As the bulk of the population was still illiterate, it was more susceptible to pictures than words, and the first dramatics were performed in church. The pictorial factor was predominant, and continued to influence theatrical life for centuries.

In one of the oldest documents known to us, the «*Concordia Regularis*», drawn up by the Bishop of Winchester in the second half of the 10th century, Flanders was rightly described as the cradle of liturgical drama.

None of the texts of this embryonic theatre have survived, not even from the time when performances began to take place in the public square instead of in the church itself. But for a very few exceptions, the first and only sources of reference are the old 14th and 15th century municipal records, in which any money spent for these performances was carefully noted.

In addition to the holy Christmas and Easter plays, there were countless performances devoted to the Virgin Mary. However, the only ones known to us are «*De Zeven Brusselse Bliscappen*» (The seven joys of Brussels), of which only two texts have survived: «*De Eerste Bliscap*» (The first joy) and «*De Zevende Bliscap*» (The seventh joy). A great many miracle plays and lives of saints also began to appear. The performances were held at street corners or in the course of religious processions. Most of the time they were inspired by local cults or legends.

Only some of the «miracle plays», which were also called «mysteries» have come down to us. One of them has remained part of the popular repertoire from the 15th century until the present day: it is «*Mariken van Nieumeghen*» (Mary of Nijmegen). Both by the content (the play shows the victory of the worship of Mary over the devil) and by the lively pace of the plot, this miracle play was a forerunner of the Renaissance, thanks to the vivid portraiture of the characters, who stand out as flesh and blood creatures. The work, which could well pass for an early Faustian drama, has survived every change in theatrical fashion and is still being performed. The first printing of «*Mariken van Nieumeghen*» dates from 1518, but despite much research, the name of the author is still unknown.

«*Elckerlyc*» (Everyman), which has been the subject of much discussion, is of more universal interest, even though it is more primitive in form. Hugo von Hofmannstahl's German adaptation of this play, called «*Jederman*», is still performed every year at Salzburg. In 1910, an American University professor, Francis Wood,

put an end to the debate as to whether «*Elckerlyc*» was of Flemish or English origin. After a learned comparison of the two texts, Professor Wood proved that «*Everyman*» is in fact a fairly poor translation of the original Flemish «*Elckerlyc*», which is believed to be the work of Petrus Dorlandus.

«*Elckerlyc*» is a morality play, a form that was also known as «*battement*» or «*esbattement*». These were secular plays of a didactic character, which used allegory to express specific ideas. In them abstract concepts such as death, love, virtue, etc., were depicted as actual characters.

In the play, God calls on «*Elckerlyc*», man, to account for himself. He has given thought only to earthly nourishments and is surrounded by friends and flatterers, but when death turns up he is abandoned by all, with the sole exceptions of virtue and knowledge.

The problems of death and the hereafter were and still are constant factors in the Flemish drama.

THE «ABELE SPELEN» OR «NOBLE PLAYS»

The first example of secular theatre transcending the framework of religious drama, was only discovered much later, at the beginning of the 19th century, by Hoffman von Fallersleben in a manuscript called the «*Hulthemse Handschrift*» (Hulthem manuscript). Charles Hulthem was a Ghent magistrate. The manuscript consisted of poetry, prose and drama. The four plays discovered in this way, which immediately aroused considerable interest, were given the name «*abele spelen*» or «*noble plays*». It is supposed that the word «*abele*» used in the manuscript was intended to mean noble or distinguished. These «*abele spelen*» are a unique phenomenon in European medieval literature. They are closely related to the knightly epics and date from the first half of the 15th century. The author's name is unknown.

Except for «*Vanden Winter ende Vanden Sommer*» (Of Winter and Summer) which is a poetic but also instructive allegory, the other plays «*Lanseloet*» (Lancelot), «*Esmoreit*» and «*Grifant*» are romantic dramas in which the subject is handled in a psychological and somewhat melodramatic manner. This again is one of the constant factors in Flemish dramatic literature. Honour and the sating of passions, love and happiness threatened by the social gulf which separates the lovers, these are the subjects of «*Lanseloet*» which is without doubt the best constructed and most frequently performed of these works. The struggle for

Independent life which has to be waged against the adversities of fate is in itself a theme of unquestionable dramatic force.

In addition to the «abele spelen», many popular farces or «cluyten» have been preserved, and these faithfully reproduce the atmosphere and mentality of the time. They are short, somewhat archaic sketches but full of colour and movement, and they are still acceptable to present-day audiences. But they are a naive, poignant genre, rather than humorous. The best known of these short plays are «De Buskenblazer» (The blower's farce) and «Drie Daghe Lord» (A lord for three days).

Space is lacking for any further description of the many works which constitute the ancient history of the Flemish theatre. But as we have shown, the old Flemish drama has produced some extremely important plays which, furthermore, have successfully withstood the test of time. Even today, they are the pride of the Dutch language drama: in none of the neighbouring countries of Europe is there any equivalent of the «abele spelen».

THE RHETORICIANS

From a sociological point of view, the ensuing period was of the utmost importance for the Dutch-language area of Belgium. For centuries the country had known nothing but war and foreign occupation. From a general theatrical point of view the period was less interesting, but the new movement in the Dutch-language area consisted of the Rhetoricians, of whom the many amateur theatrical companies to be found in Flanders nowadays are the direct descendants.

In some municipal records of the second half of the 15th century, the earlier description of «Theatrical companions» has been replaced by «Rhetorical companions». It can therefore be assumed that this roughly was the period when the Rhetorical Chambers were first formed. The example for them came from Provence, where companies had been formed to promote poetry, but they were also inspired by the «puys d'amour» in the north of France.

The Rhetoricians' aims were similar, but their main concern was with dramatic art. They were often asked to enliven popular celebrations by means of picturesque pageants.

They were used in an almost official manner and, in addition, the Rhetoricians received from the municipal authorities a «charter» listing their rights, and duties. The «Geselschap van den Fonteyne» (The Fountain company), of Ghent, was one of the earliest of these companies and subsequently became the principal Chamber of Flemish Rhetoricians.



Performance of «Gloriant»
by the students of the
«Herman Teirlinck Studio».

THE «LANDJUWEEL» OR DRAMA TOURNAMENT

«Landjuwelen», or drama tournaments, began in the first half of the 16th century. The name «Landjuweel» («juweel» means jewel in Dutch) was derived from the silver trophy which was awarded to the winners, after the practice of the contests held previously by the archery companies. A company which wanted to organize a «Landjuweel» had to apply for the privileges to the authorities, and then invited competitors from other areas to participate, informing them of the theme of the play that would constitute the test. The play was specially written for the occasion by the «factor» or writer attached to the companies participating in the tournament. The host company held a sumptuous celebration lasting several days, and the results were announced with great ceremony.

Between 1426 and 1565 there appear to have been no fewer than a hundred and thirty-five drama tournaments, although only seven «Landjuwelen» are known to have occurred as a certainty: organized by the Rhetoricians the first of these took place in Malines in 1515, the last at Antwerp in 1561. Some «esbattements» or «Landjuwelen» and several farces from these times have survived, but as literary works they are of historical value only.

Returning to the 16th century tradition, King Albert in 1922 restored the «Landjuweel», as an encouragement to amateur theatricals in the Dutch language (see further).

The foregoing has clearly shown the existence of constant factors in Flemish drama.

What did the Rhetoricians perform? At first, chiefly miracle plays, the lives of saints and «mysteries», which closely resembled those of the Middle Ages. But the Rhetoricians also performed morality plays and even ventured into secular drama, but this did not enjoy a great following. Two such dramas which have survived are «*Floyssse ende Blancheffeere*» (Florice and Blancheffleur) and, especially, «*Spieghel der Minne*» (The mirror of love), by Colijn van Rijssele. Both the content and the didactical manner of this romantic drama, in the same vein as Romeo and Juliet, are strangely reminiscent of the «noble play» «*Lancelot*» (Lancelot), mentioned earlier. Originally it consisted of «*Zes Battenent Spelen*» (Six «Battenments»), the complete performance of which was spread over six days. It is the tragic tale of a young man who falls in love with a girl who is his social inferior. Both die the victims of their love.

«*Spieghel der Minne*» has in recent years been performed by official theatre companies: in 1952 in a version freely adapted by Rik Jacobs; in 1959, in a shorter and more faithful adaptation by Fred Engelen. In both cases «*Spieghel der Minne*» was seen to be a fine, simple and poetic work showing the influence both of the Rhetoricians and of the Renaissance theatre. During this same period there was no revival of comedy, which remained what it had been in the Middle Ages: it still kept to the same subjects (marital disputes), with the same coarse, popular characterization. The three most representative farces were «*De Cluyte van Playerwater*» (Playerwater's farce), «*Han-*

neken Leckertant» (Greedy Annie) and, of course, «*Nu Noch*» (Much more), which is still being performed regularly.

The «chariot plays» also date from this period. Naive morality plays were performed on carts which either circulated in processions or were incorporated in an «Ommegang» or pageant. These «chariot plays» established close and immediate contact with whatever audience happened to be on the spot.

Whereas these carts and the performances given in them were extremely rudimentary, the sets which were built in the open air for the more important plays, were often extremely spacious and richly decorated.

A PERIOD OF DECLINE

In 1609, after the wars of religion, when the northern Low Countries achieved independence through the Twelve-year Truce concluded with Spain, the southern Low Countries (i.e. the present territory of Belgium) came under the authority of Archduke Albert and Archduchess Isabella, the son-in-law and daughter of Philip II, King of Spain. While the north turned Calvinist, the south remained Catholic, with the sole exception of a small minority of supporters of the Reformation. These often emanated from the Chambers of Rhetoric, with the result that further performances by these companies were prohibited. This caused large numbers of

intellectuals, including many playwrights, to leave the southern Low Countries and to settle in the north. It was in this way that the south lost the great writer Vondel, who was of Flemish origin.

At a time when new trends were emerging everywhere and new dramatic forms were taking shape, the Dutch-language area of Belgium was silenced. This lethargy was no accident, and continued for over three centuries. This small country, which had in the past been the cradle of a promising culture, was stifled by the wars of religion, and the sequels of this asphyxia continued to be felt until the 20th century.

When the modern drama began to take shape in the west, therefore, Flanders was still reduced to silence. The eminence it had formerly enjoyed was a thing of the past. As already explained, this state of affairs was due to the emigration of intellectuals to the northern Low Countries, to the authorities' distrust of the Chambers of Rhetoric, and also to the fact that owing to an almost permanent state of war the country had been untouched by the evolution of the theatre in Europe.

Since the Middle Ages, the theatre had been an art to be enjoyed by the whole of the community. In the 18th century however, the position changed completely. The upper classes began to give favour to theatres built in the Italian manner, while the common people continued to prefer the far less sophisticated open-air plays which were performed at fairs and kermises. This not only enhanced the division of society into different classes, but also influenced dramatic literature, which ceased to have any direct bearing on the masses. Pride

many playwrights, to countries and to settle in such a way that the south was the most fertile ground, who was of the 17th century.

Trends were emerging in the 17th century. The forms were taking shape in the language area of Belgium. There was no accident in the 17th century.

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Began to take shape in the 17th century. The forms were still reduced to it had formerly been. As already said, the past was due to the fact that the northern Low Countries' distrust of the French also to the fact that the permanent state of war was untouched by the French.

The theatre had been the whole of the country. However, the position of the upper classes was built in the 17th century. The common people continued to be sophisticated open-air performances at fairs and in the division of the upper classes, but also in the 17th century, which ceased to be the masses. Pride in the masses. Pride

place now went to the individual.

These were the days when theatres were going on in cities throughout the whole of Western Europe. In Brussels, foreign companies often came to perform at the Archdukes' palace. Then a first theatre was built, and performances were given regularly by a French troupe.

It flared up again repeatedly in the Flemish provinces and, in 1695, the lovely city of Brussels too suffered great damage. During the process of reconstruction, a new hall was offered to the city's theatrical companies. The «Grand Theatre» was built on the site of the present Middelheim Theatre, and it was used mostly for opera, a new genre that was just emerging.

After the Twelve-year Truce, the Chambers of Rhetoric resumed their activities, but these were not experimental in character.

The dramatic art of these troubled times, few years emerged and there were hardly any signs of real value. One name which has survived is that of the Dunkirk Rhetorician Michiel de Swaen (1654-1707). His Bruegel-like farce «De Gecroonde Leerse» (The crowned boot), which is based on a tale involving Charles the Bold, is still frequently performed.

The survival of this well constructed farce encouraged the rediscovery of other — but less interesting — plays by Michiel de Swaen, including «De Menswording» (The creation of man). The late Kamiel Huysmans, a well-known Belgian statesman, contributed actively to the rehabilitation of Michiel de Swaen's work. Two names which should be mentioned in the period of the Rhetoricians are those of Ogier and of his daughter Barbara Ogier; but their work, mostly comedy, has not stood the test of time.

THE REIGN OF MOLIÈRE AND VOLTAIRE

Classicism and the Renaissance had had little effect on Flemish dramatic writing. Conversely even greater authority was enjoyed by religious literature and, at the other end of the scale, by popular and peasant literature. In addition, the Spanish domination introduced the country to cloak and dagger melodrama which continued to influence Dutch-language playwrights in Belgium until quite recently. In matters of the theatre, the 18th century proved to be an almost slavish copy of the previous century, but became perhaps even more decadent. The Rhetoricians had turned into chronic drunkards far more intent on merry-making than on cultivating the mind. The gulf between the different classes became even deeper, and more and more attention came to be paid to the individual. There were no more open-air performances and Flemish dramatic life was concentrated entirely in the theatres. Only foreign plays were performed, and this led to further public disaffection. Europe was submerged by French plays: those of Molière and Voltaire soon conquered the Flemish stage, and were often shown in poor translations. Later on, after the year 1800, the German playwright Kotzebue became the Flemish theatrical world's favourite author.

The country could not claim a single dramatic writer worthy of the name. National feeling was dead and the upper classes no longer knew the language of the people. The Battle of Waterloo, which was decisive in European history, reunited the Belgian provinces with the nor-

thern Low Countries and at the same time brought a respite to those Chambers of Rhetoric which still existed. King William I of the Netherlands granted them his special protection. The custom of allowing certain theatrical companies to describe themselves as «royal» first appeared at this time and was afterwards continued by the Belgian Sovereigns. Until the eve of the Revolution of 1830, which again separated the two countries, the King of the Netherlands supported and protected all Dutch-language artistic ventures. Although this did not lead immediately to the creation of an original repertoire, this policy did mark the beginnings of a trend that was to prove extremely favourable to the drama in Flanders.

INDEPENDENT BELGIUM

After Belgian independence in 1830, the Dutch-language troupes in Belgium encountered new obstacles, for they were accused of having served the Calvinistic Netherlands. The upper classes of newly independent Belgium were not only French-speaking but were wholly French-oriented, and ignored the very existence of Dutch.

As soon as the revolution was over, young intellectuals who had been wholly educated in Dutch under the previous regime — something that was no longer possible in the new Belgian state — set to work. And soon the theatrical companies were reverting to secular tradition.

Ghent set off first, as early as 1833. This city was to be the birthplace of a writer who, within the framework of the Belgian State, was destined to breathe new life into the Flemish drama and to lay the foundations for its subsequent development. He was a doctor, Hippoliet Van Peene (1811-1864), whose wife, an actress of considerable merit, was well known in Gent theatrical circles. Hippoliet Van Peene provided her with custom-made parts in some sixty different plays.

In October 1853, Antwerp too acquired its own troupe, thanks to the efforts of a talented actor, Viktor Driessens. But it was not until 1874 that the city had its own Dutch-language theatre. As this building has now been demolished, the Antwerp troupe has for thirty years been performing at the Theatre Royal, the former French Opera house.

In 1887 an official Flemish theatre was inaugu-

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red in Brussels and, in 1889, Ghent acquired too.

Some of the authors of this period deserve to be remembered, but nowadays their names can rarely be seen on the billboards. They are astor de Tière (1856-1920) who produced a number of plays that could be classified as tantic realism; Lodewyck Scheltjens (1861-1949) whose uncomplicated drama is fraught with social implications; Albrecht Roden- (1856-1880) and Alfred Hegenscheidt (1860-1951), two writers of lyrical, historical and tastic plays and, lastly, Father Cyriel Ver-ave (1874-1949), who wrote emphatic his-ical dramas.

The great and famous naturalist novelist Cyriel Buysse (1859-1932) also wrote a number of for the theatre, including an extremely good tragi-comic one-act play, «Susususut», a caricature exposing the Flemish villagers' lack of spiritual life. Cyriel Buysse was the writer of a play which is still very lar, «Gezin van Paemel» (The van Paemel y), a touching reminiscence of the early days of socialism. The action takes place in a resent family whose members work like slaves for a squire who can dispose of their positions and who speaks French, a language is foreign to them.

The plays of Raf Verhulst (1866-1941) were very er at one time, but are no longer performed nowadays.

The Belgian government initiated a policy which it still pursues) of granting official ers. Triennial Prizes in particular, to Dutch-uage dramatic authors. In 1859, the State was awarded for the first time, to Hippo-

These measures undoubtedly stimulated the zeal of Flemish writers, despite the fact that their work rarely stood up to comparison with that of their foreign contemporaries. The Dutch-language drama in Belgium was developing quantitatively, but not yet qualitatively. Historical romantic drama, which aimed to awaken the national conscience, dominated the dramatic repertoire, and matters remained thus until the middle of the 20th century.

It was only towards the year 1880 that, thanks to a higher level of civilization, greater freedom of opinion, the growing interest of the intellectuals, and thanks also to the awarding of prizes, to the stature of the three companies of professional actors (in Antwerp, Brussels and Ghent) and to the creation of courses in dramatic art, the theatrical level in Flanders began to improve substantially, thus laying the foundation for the decisive impetus it was to enjoy almost fifty years later.

Oscar De Gruyter (1885-1929) the man who gave the Flemish theatre its first stimulus, was a Flemish university graduate — a rare thing at that time — and held a doctorate in Germanic Philology.

Oscar De Gruyter as a theatrical promotor, and Herman Teirlinck (see anon) as a playwright, may together be regarded as the pioneers of the Belgian contemporary theatre in Dutch.

THE PIONEER : OSCAR DE GRUYTER

In Ghent in 1908, the theatrical enthusiast and idealist Oscar De Gruyter founded the «Vlaamse Vereniging voor Toneel- en Voordracht-kunst» (Flemish Association for Dramatic Art and Elocution). The first title in its repertoire was «Starkadd», the only masterpiece written by Alfred Hegenscheidt. This play reflected the views of De Gruyter himself, who wanted language to be fine and beautiful. «Starkadd» responded entirely to this ideal. The play was later revived repeatedly, in different circumstances.

In the last year of the 1914-1918 war, De Gruyter succeeded in forming a theatrical company to entertain Flemish troops on the Yser front. This group was called «Het Fronttoneel» (The theatre at the front) and this is the name under which it has gone down in history. Its official title however was «Vlaamse Afdeling van de Schouwburg der Koningin» (Flemish Section of the Queen's Theatre). This was a remarkable venture as in the Belgian army at that time, Dutch was not in use as an official language.

Oscar De Gruyter never included superficial or purely entertaining works in his repertoire. On the contrary, one of the plays he put on was «Warenar», a classical comedy by Hooft, a playwright from the northern Netherlands.

The great offensive prior to the Armistice put a temporary stop to the work of the «Fronttoneel», but it survived after the end of the war. It went on tour in Flanders with a repertoire including «Starkadd» and other plays, until De Gruyter was demobilized. Then the «Front-

toneel» obtained permission to perform for the Belgian soldiers stationed in occupied German territory.

The relatively ephemeral existence of the «Fronttoneel» nevertheless formed the embryo of the rebirth which ultimately enabled the Dutch-language theatre in Belgium, and literature too, to embark on a promising new phase. A year after leaving the army Oscar De Gruyter founded «Het Vlaamse Volkstoneel» (The Flemish Popular Theatre). The company included Staf Bruggen, a former prisoner of war and graduate of the School of Dramatic Art, who later became the idol of Flemish audiences. The aim of the «Vlaamse Volkstoneel» was to assemble a company that would be more demanding and ambitious than the existing official theatres.

De Gruyter was so keen that he resigned from the professorship he held in Ghent. Above all, he wanted to raise the Flemish theatre to the European level. In addition to the works of Sophocles, Goethe and Shaw, his repertoire also included original plays. The «Volkstoneel» which also performed in Holland, succeeded in attracting mass audiences as well as intellectuals.

This lasted until 1922. At that time, Oscar De Gruyter was appointed Director of the «Koninklijke Nederlandse Schouwburg» (Royal Dutch language theatre) or K.N.S., in Antwerp. He remained in this post until his early death, in Nice in 1929. Thanks to his efforts, this company became the most important in the country, comparable to the best European companies. Oscar De Gruyter altered the repertoire, renovated the actors' style, and attached prime importance to language. Long after De Gruy-

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«Scenes from the life of Saint Francis», a play staged in 1928 by the «Vlaamse Volkstoneel»

ter's death, the «Koninklijke Nederlandse Schouwburg» was still benefiting from his teachings and achievements. De Gruyter's dream, one that was also cherished by Herman Teirlinck, — the creation of a National Theatre — did not materialize until 1946.

HET VLAAMSE VOLKSTONEEL

«Het Vlaamse Volkstoneel» (Flemish Popular Theatre) was not doomed, but it was destined to change course and thus to render even greater services to the cause of a revival in the Flemish theatre, which henceforth attained European stature. What did this new spirit consist of? Oscar De Gruyter's successor, the Dutch director John de Meester junior, gave the «Vlaamse Volkstoneel» a Catholic emphasis. In his view, the drama was not meant to serve literature but should, on the contrary, break away from literature through the medium of the avant-garde theatre. To this end, he adapted the theories of Tairoff and Meyerhold to his own views.

In 1924, the reorganized «Vlaamse Volkstoneel» reopened with the miracle play «*Mariken van Nieumeghen*» (Mary of Nijmegen).

The company performed large numbers of plays from Dutch literature, including some from mediaeval times and from the era of the Chambers of Rhetoric. But it also performed plays by Flemish authors and modern plays culled from the international repertoire. It sur-

prised its audiences with an entirely new approach to acting, which replaced the old emphasis on words as such by total concentration on rhythm. Producers borrowed techniques from constructivism and from the circus. They wanted at all costs to astound the public which sometimes protested — though not frequently — against the profanation of all traditions. Many spectators were converted to the ideas of Johan de Meester. Thanks to the press, the new forms he created aroused interest in different European countries and even in America. The «Vlaamse Volkstoneel» was on tour, visiting Holland and Germany; it even succeeded in rousing the sophisticated Parisian critics and audiences when it gave its first performances in the French capital in 1927. At the invitation of Lugné-Poë it performed Vondel's «*Lucifer*» at the Comédie des Champs-Élysées. Less than a month later, Firmin Gémier invited the company to perform «*Lucifer*» again in Paris, as part of the International Theatre Festival. Gémier was extremely complimentary of his presentation of the performance. But «*Lucifer*» was not the only play which the «Vlaamse Volkstoneel» performed in Paris: it also showed «*Tijl*», a somewhat sarcastic and bitter paraphrase of the Uylenspiegel legend. This was a play that had been written specially for the «Vlaamse Volkstoneel» by Anton Van der Velde, a baroque stylist, who had devised it for the benefit of Johan de Meester.

Two years later, the company was invited to perform before the Royal Family and the Court at Laeken, where French was the dominant language at that time. This was a very unusual event for a Dutch-language company. At Laeken in July 1929 the «Vlaamse Volkstoneel»

was with an entirely new style, which replaced the old style, as such by total concentration on producers borrowed technique and from the circus costs to astound the public — though not free of profanation of all traditional values.

Meester. Thanks to the fact he created aroused interest in countries and even in the Netherlands (Vlaamse Volksstoneel) went to the Netherlands and Germany; it ever since the sophisticated Paris when it gave its first performance in 1927. At the time it performed Vondel's *De Schied des Champs-Elysées* (1927), Firmin Gémier invited Meester to *«Lucifer»* again in Paris. The International Theatre Festival of 1927 was extremely complimentary in its performance. But *«Lucifer»* was only the beginning of the success which the «Vlaamse Volksstoneel» had in Paris: it also showed a great deal of sarcastic and bitter humor, the aspiegell legend. This was written specially for Meester by Anton Van de Venne, who had devised it for Meester.

Meester's *«History of the Soldier»* by C.F. Raaij was replaced by Igor Stravinsky. This was the first of Johan de Meester's productions for that season. He returned to Holland during the 1929 season. The year 1929 was a bad year for the Dutch theatre which, in Oscar De Gruyter's opinion, was one of its leading classicists and, in Meester's opinion, a bold visionary.

Meester, a bold visionary. It seems strange that the «Vlaamse Volksstoneel» did not yield a new generation of dramatists, despite the fact that it performed many original works written in Dutch. It is enough to first performed the works of the playwrights such as Willem Putman, Anton de Velde, Paul de Mont and Felix Timmermans (who excelled at rendering the national character), they were hardly ever experimented with dramatically conceived. Johan de Meester, however, fashioned these works in his own way, with rhythm as the dominant factor.

Meester, who later achieved world fame, is the sole important writer whose name remains linked to the «Vlaamse Volksstoneel». Michel de Ghelderode was French-born but he had realized how great was the scope offered by this theatre, for which he wrote several plays. The «Vlaamse Volksstoneel» discovered Michel de Ghelderode long before his talent was recognized in Paris and elsewhere.

Meester already mentioned the year 1929 almost fatal to the Dutch-language theatre in the Netherlands. The «Vlaamse Volksstoneel» managed to survive, however, under the iron hand of Anton de Velde and Lode Geysen; the former was a writer but particularly as producer particularly concerned with pictorial pro-

blems, while the latter was a young man still and dynamic. Both tried to apply the Russian theories for the renewal of the drama with rather more logic than Johan de Meester had shown before them.

In 1930 there was a regrettable split in the company. Anton Van de Velde and Lode Geysen went on working with a new company, consisting mainly of moderately gifted amateurs. It only lasted two years. The former members of what had been the «Vlaamse Volksstoneel» joined forces under the leadership of Staf Bruggen and formed an independent company known as the «Nationaal Vlaams Toneel» (National Flemish Theatre) or «Groep Staf Bruggen» (Staf Bruggen Group) which survived until the beginning of the second world war. This company was highly successful but never attained the stature of the «Vlaamse Volksstoneel» which had enjoyed European renown.

The «Groep Staf Bruggen» conceived its work in the theatre within the context of the Flemish National Movement. In 1940 Staf Bruggen was appointed director of the Theatre of the city of Ghent, by the City Council which had been elected pre-war. Staf Bruggen's greatest merit lies in the fact that, for his first theatrical season, his repertoire consisted entirely of original works written in the Dutch language.



«Don Gil de la calzas verdes» by Tirso de Molina, at the «Nationaal Toneel».

THE PROMOTOR : HERMAN TEIRLINCK

What else happened between the wars — a period that was so stimulating for the theatre? One name that has already been mentioned, parallel with Oscar De Gruyter, is that of the writer and essayist Herman Teirlinck (1879-1957).

Their careers had been similar in many respects. But Herman Teirlinck had had the good fortune to attract attention with several of his earlier ventures; this good fortune did not come to Oscar De Gruyter, who moreover died too young. Both men had fought for the improvement and refinement of the Dutch language without however ignoring the valid contribution which the popular dialects represented in the theatre, it was the ideal of both men to achieve the establishment of a Dutch-language National Theatre, together with a training school for actors.

In 1946 Herman Teirlinck, in his capacity as government adviser, was able to watch over the implementation of the idea that was so close to his heart. The role of National Theatre was allotted to the Antwerp company set up by Oscar De Gruyter. But despite the best of intentions, the sole result lay in the allocation of larger state subsidies. And the scheme proved so unproductive that in 1967 the Antwerp «Koninklijke Nederlandse Schouwburg» lost the status of a National Theatre and, to the present day, no further progress has been made in implementing the 1946 decision to create a Dutch-language National Theatre in Belgium. Herman Teirlinck's ideas about actors' training had less disappointing results. A «Studio» was

set up at the same time as the National Theatre to give promising young artists three years of daily tuition in the various theatrical disciplines. After passing their final test, the pupils of this «Studio» may be recruited as professional actors and actresses by various companies.

Herman Teirlinck was a man of many parts. Although he was so active in the theatre, it is perhaps his work as a novelist which will prove the most enduring. Even so he wrote, as early as 1922, an astoundingly advanced play called «De Vertraagde Film» (Slow-motion film). With this play he wanted to put an end, once and for all, to the realism and naturalism that had imprisoned Flemish dramatic writing. He described «De Vertraagde Film» as a «danced, sung and spoken drama» and it reflected the expressionistic spirit which was then building up. Nevertheless Teirlinck's play was still based on melodrama: the story of two lovers who are goaded to suicide by a sequence of trite events. In the brief interval between life and death, the film of their life unfolds in slow motion.

Surprise and admiration were caused by the shape of the play, more than the content. Henceforth Teirlinck was destined to dominate theatrical life in Flanders for over forty years. In the meantime he was appointed adviser to the King and wrote several works in the same vein as «De Vertraagde Film», including an adaptation entitled «Ik dien» (I serve) of the «Beatrijs» legend, an ancient «Marial play», as well as «De Man zonder lijf» (The man without a body) in which he already used the abstract approach to symbolize man's quest for happiness.

He was keenly interested in the evolution of the theatre throughout the world, and compared his own views of the drama with those of Gordon Craig and Stanislavsky. He interpreted their message in the light of his own personal inspiration, both in his essays and in the courses he continued to give until shortly before his death, at an advanced age, at the «Studio» of the «Nationaal Toneel», now called the «Herman Teirlinck Studio».

Teirlinck's optics changed repeatedly, both in his theories and in his work. Starting out as a visionary theoretician, faithful to Gordon Craig's acting theories, he later evolved into an ardent exponent of the expressionistic forms of a communal art, and towards the end of his life showed a marked preference for theatre on the monumental scale.

His first period ended in 1937 with the play «*De Ekster op de Galg*» (The magpie on the gallows). This again was a melodrama in which the hero, an old man, relives the collapse of a dream. Herman Teirlinck prepared several plays for special occasions as well as open-air performances; later he embarked on a synthesis of the classical Greek tragedies. He collected a number of concise texts from which he had eliminated every sign of lyricism, keeping throughout to the bare facts. His last volume, entitled «*Versmoorde Goden*» (The murdered gods) which dates from 1961, contains three monumental works: «*Taco*» an original historical drama, «*Jocaste tegen God*» (Jocasta against God) an unusual interpretation of the tragedy of Oedipus, and «*De Fluitketel*» (The whistling kettle), a drama based on the present-day mentality of young people.

Herman Teirlinck, the prince of Dutch Litera-

ture, was despite his changeable, complex personality, a writer who rendered invaluable services to the cause of Dutch literature in general and of the Flemish theatre in particular.

AMATEUR DRAMATICS

In the meantime, amateur companies had been grouped in national federations, which set out with some success to defend their members' interests. The «Nationaal Toneelverbond» (National Theatrical Federation) was the first to be established in the year 1908. Although it was in principle free of any religious or political influence, it was in fact of Liberal inspiration. After the second world war, this led to the creation of a new national federation, the «Nationaal Vlaams Kristelijk Toneelverbond» (Flemish National Christian Theatrical Federation), or N.V.K.T., which consisted of Catholic theatrical companies. This was followed later by the «Socialistische Toneelfederatie» (Socialist Theatrical Federation), which included the more socially-minded companies. At the present time, some two hundred and fifty

ple companies belong to the «Nationaal Toneel-
verbond» while the «Nationaal Vlaams Kriste-
lijk Toneelverbond» includes more than six
hundred, and the «Socialistische Toneelfede-
ratie» about forty. Allowing also for those which
are not affiliated to any national federation, the
total number of amateur companies in the Flem-
ish area can thus be estimated to amount to
about a thousand.

In 1922 at the insistence of Herman Teirlinck,
King Albert I restored the «Landjuwelen»,
reviving a tradition that dated back to the 16th
century. The purpose of this move was to lend
the amateur theatrical companies new inspira-
tion. Henceforth it was decided to hold the
competition every year, and a commission was
appointed to organize it. King Leopold III, Prince
Charles the Prince Regent, and King Baudouin
continued to honour the «Landjuwelen»
with their patronage. However, owing to the
war the competition did not take place be-
tween the years 1940 and 1947. Nowadays so-
berer companies of Flemish amateur actors
and actresses compete in the «Landjuweel» every year, and
the contests are held successively in each of
the Dutch-language provinces and in the Flem-
ish area of Brabant.

THE PERIOD OF FOLKLORIC REALISM

Two authors in particular must be mentioned
for the period between the two wars. They were
still working after 1945, but it was unquestion-
ably before this date that they produced
their best plays. Although on the whole they
did not pretend to anything more than folkloric
realism, they nevertheless enjoyed such a
reputation as to be incapable of omission from
this enumeration. The first of the two writers,
Gaston Martens (1883-1964) became interna-
tionally known, thanks to one of his most typi-
cally Flemish plays called «*Paradijsvogels*»
(Birds of paradise). This illustrates two con-
stant factors in Flemish life : the inhabitants'
combination of naive piety with Bruegel-like
excesses. «*Paradijsvogels*» was first performed
in Flanders without achieving any particular
success. Perhaps Martens had given his
audience too faithful a portrait of his compa-
triots. However, when the writer emigrated to
the South of France during the war, the French
translation which he had made of his play came
to the notice of the film and theatre people,
who were captivated by it. «*Paradijsvogels*»
was shown in Paris and was later made into a
film called «*Les gueux au paradis*», starring
Raimu and Fernandel. The French success of
the play stirred up curiosity in Flanders and
also in overseas countries, including America
and Japan. Gaston Martens has written other
plays which have not been as widely shown,
even though some of them been performed in
France.

Gaston Martens returned to Flanders, and it was only after the second world war that «Paradijsvogels» began to triumph there. It is a pity that his later writing was not of the same calibre.

Jos Janssen (1888-1968) was a contemporary and compatriot of Gaston Martens, and wrote in the same theatrical vein. Even so his works are less religious and less popular in character. Jos Janssen, who wrote plays for an amateur company from West Flanders, also had his work performed by official companies, thanks to his play «*De Wonderdokter*» (The miracle healer). This is a satirical, folkloric and entertaining work in which the playwright ridicules the credulity of certain country people and the charlatan practices of a village healer. Jos Janssen also wrote comedies which are set in small provincial towns, and several historical plays of uneven quality. Thanks to the success of the «*Wonderdokter*» these lesser plays were also performed by the main theatre groups. Jos Janssen however never attained the same international fame as Gaston Martens had achieved.

EXPRESSIONISM AND ROMANTICISM

Mention should also be made of a number of other playwrights who were active between the two wars. Like the two authors described above, they also went on writing after the war, sometimes in a different form. Ernest Wille Schmidt (1886-1937), should not be omitted even though in practice his work is only performed in Antwerp, because he captivated the official theatrical companies with his well constructed plays, based mostly on actual events occurring in bourgeois families. Paul de Meester (1895-1950), who was disabled during the 1914-18 war, enriched the «*Vlaamse Volkstoneel*» with an expressionistic drama called «*Nuances*», which was anti-militarist in inspiration. After this he produced a series of historical dramas and one passion play. After the war he produced simple but well-written provincial comedies entirely devoid of any folkloric element, and these proved successful in the repertoire of the Flemish theatre companies. Willem Putman (1900-1954), a romantic novelist, was also the author of several subtle psychological dramas which the theatrical companies were delighted to include in their repertoire. Frans Demers (1905), formerly a colonial settler, gave the Dutch-language theatre in Belgium its first «colonial» plays, and they were remarkably good. All are set in Belgium's former African colony, but the emphasis is more on the problem of race relationships than on purely local issues. Lode Cantens (1907-1955) belongs to the same trend, but his romanticism is more ingenuous. He also produced

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«Paradise» by Gaston Martens.

historical dramas, biblical plays and other plays with fast dialogue.

During the four years of the war, when Belgium was occupied territory, theatrical life continued. There were fewer amateur dramatics during this period, because the «Landjuwelen» had been abolished, but the three official theatres in Antwerp, Brussels and Ghent kept up their performances throughout. A number of younger writers set to work, and these four years, which might have been lost for the theatre, witnessed the creation of several original works in the Dutch language. The German occupation authorities organized a number of performances in their own language, while certain professional companies enjoyed the cooperation of well-known German producers.

In 1945, after the liberation and the ensuing repression of collaborators, most of these companies emerged blameless and it is fair to conclude that theatrical life was by no means at a standstill during the war.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF OFFICIAL COMPANIES

New directors took over. The Ghent Theatre, one of the three official Dutch-language companies, disappeared, and thus the city lost its own troupe. However, as already mentioned, the «Nationaal Toneel» was formed in 1946, to the benefit of the Antwerp «Koninklijke Nederlandse Schouwburg» which was at that time regarded as the best in the country. Moreover, for political reasons the mission of «Nationaal Theatre» was also conferred upon a young amateur company, which was somewhat lacking in experience but rich in zeal, and which had been touring the Flemish area for several years. It became this company's function to bring quality performances to the remotest provincial areas, where the official companies would be unable to find sufficient well-equipped stages.

This young company, the «Reizend Volksteater» or R.V.T. (Travelling Popular Theatre) performed its task with more zeal than talent. But the interest which it showed in original Dutch language works and the encouragement which it extended to budding young playwrights, constituted an example for its more senior colleagues, the Flemish theatres of Antwerp and Brussels. In 1967, the «Koninklijke Nederlandse Schouwburg» lost its function of «Nationaal Theatre» and since then the «Reizend Volksteater» has enjoyed extensive support from the provincial authorities of Antwerp, where it is established. In the years to come the «Reizend Volksteater» will therefore be able to pursue

INDEPENDENT COMPANIES

over. The Ghent Theatre, a special Dutch-language company, and thus the city lost its first, as already mentioned, as already mentioned. The company was formed in 1946, in Antwerp «Koninklijke Nederlandse» which was at that time the only Dutch-language theatre in the country. Moreover, it conferred upon a young company, which was somewhat out of rich in zeal, an opportunity to develop the Flemish area. It became this company's function to perform in the remote areas, where the official companies were unable to find sufficient personnel.

From 1945, under the combined auspices of the Ghent Theatre and the Belgian State, as the Ghent Theatre, which no longer has its own company, this has since then been the result of several performances by the «Nationaal Toneel» which until 1967 was assimilated into the «Koninklijke Nederlandse Schouwburg». From 1945 to the «Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg» in Brussels, to the «Koninklijke Nederlandse Schouwburg» in Antwerp and to the «Nationaal Toneel», the Dutch-language theatre began to produce new growth. Even so, the years went by before this efflorescence began to produce fruits of any note.

Of the new growth was due to the creation of the «Nationaal Toneel's «Studio» or «Teatr Teirlinck Studio» and to the creation of these schools of dramatic art. These various organizations produced so much trained personnel that there was an urgent need to find a valid use.

Media came into being as outlets for the improved communications and more international contacts broadened the horizons and enabled actors to observe how drama was developing elsewhere. The result was soon to show. The theatrical critic J. M. Monteyne is characteristic of the post-war period. He began writing in an Antwerp newspaper and he was the first drama critic in the Dutch-language area of Belgium who was not a literary graduate. He crowned his career with a book called «Drama en Toneel door de eeuwen» (The drama and the theatre through the ages), which has become the most extensive work on the subject.

YOUTH THEATRE

Before moving on to the post-war era, i.e. the years since 1945, something should be said about the «Jeugdteater» (Youth Theatre) of Antwerp, which for many years was a unique phenomenon in the European and even world theatre. The «Jeugdteater» was a child of the war, even though the occupying power had no hand in its inception.

It was a young actor, Fred Engelen, who died prematurely in 1968, who was responsible during the war years for the creation, as a private venture, of a theatrical company for young people. Engelen had worked as a producer for the «Koninklijke Nederlandse Schouwburg» and later became director of the «Nationaal Toneel's «Studio», which had just been set up. More than fifteen years after the war, he and his wife, the actress Tine Balder, left for South Africa; he was anxious to help develop the drama in a country where a language closely akin to Dutch is spoken.

However, the real initiator of the youth theatre was Joris Diels, who was at that time the director of the «Koninklijke Nederlandse Schouwburg» in Antwerp. Thanks to his organizational talent and to his thorough knowledge of the problems of the theatre, he was usually regarded as the most qualified successor to Oscar De Gruyter. After the war, Joris Diels and his wife, the talented actress Ida Wasserman, emigrated to the Netherlands, where both are now working in one of the leading companies. It was Joris Diels who put Fred Engelen in charge of the «Jeugdteater», the expenses of

which were not covered by any subsidies. But the aim of the venture was to familiarize young people with the theatre, and thus to prepare future generations of regular and enlightened theatre-goers.

This paedagogic aim was maintained when, after the liberation, the «Jeugdteater» was turned into an official theatre subsidized chiefly by the Antwerp city authorities but by other official bodies too.

Corry Lievens was put in charge, and she worked tirelessly for more than twenty years, devoting her incomparable paedagogic and artistic talents to the venture. In 1956 she visited the U.S.A., to give talks about this minor but unusual aspect of theatrical life.

The performances of the «Jeugdteater» are not by child actors but by professionals who present plays written specially for young audiences. It was here that many budding Flemish playwrights first had their works performed in public. The company presents three or four shows per week, and each play runs for about two weeks.

As to the length of the youth theatre season, this is the same as that of official theatres. Members of the «Jeugdteater» enjoy virtually the same terms and conditions of employment as those of other professional companies.

The Antwerp «Jeugdteater», which has different sets for each of the plays it performs, naturally has a cyclical repertoire since its audience turn-over is so fast. Its performances met a need that had not yet been filled elsewhere.

NEW THEATRES

It was not until 1950, when the first of the «Studio» pupils embarked on their careers, that the process of rejuvenation, renewal and development began to come to fruition in the Dutch language theatre in Belgium. The first crops of drama students were not all recruited by official theatres, and those who succeeded in obtaining a contract often came up against mentalities and attitudes which their youthful outlook found it difficult to accept.

The repertoire struck them as antiquated and as being out of touch with, if not entirely divorced from, recent theatrical trends. Experimental plays were at that time being performed throughout Western Europe, and the young generation of actors and producers were eager to introduce a new repertoire, which stood little chance of proving acceptable to the traditional theatres. In particular, they questioned established acting methods which ran counter to their own youthful dynamism and progressive ideas.

Thus began a process which had until then seemed wholly utopian, especially in the Dutch language area of Belgium. Armed only with their own restricted means and burning zeal, they set out to provide that which the Flemish theatre lacked. Small theatres began to sprout up in attics, private rooms or cellars, wherever there was a small space in which they could vent their love for the stage. Countless new companies were formed, without financial help and without proper equipment. They performed in small halls, which made

...accommodate audiences of only a hundred people, or even less. At the beginning, prospects were nil ; but Flanders was discovering a new theatrical universe which had until then been concealed by the silent conspiracy of the official companies. In the early days, actors earned nothing at all. The smaller companies consisted of no more than a few professional actors, whose efforts were complemented whenever necessary by gifted members of the local amateur groups, which began to see their ranks sadly depleted. The new groups were called «semi-professional troupes», owing chiefly to their heterogeneous membership.

This type of company soon came to be known in Flanders as «chamber theatre» despite the fact that mostly they performed in attics or cellars. It was thanks to them that sympathetic writers came to know Eugene Ionesco, Sam Beckett, Arthur Adamov as well as other, more revolutionary writers. Although audiences were not won over immediately to this new, seemingly absurd type of play, which they often found incomprehensible at first hearing, they were keenly interested in the young generation of playwrights and in their bold ventures.

In this way Dutch-speaking Belgians were enabled to establish contact with the trends emerging abroad, and this they achieved by importing the works of playwrights who were making a name for themselves in other countries.

GHENT : THE FIRST STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

Oddly enough, although Ghent was at that time without a professional company of its own (but received frequent visits from the Antwerp «Nationaal Toneel») it was in the year 1950 the first city to have an enterprising young company, called «Arca Kelderteater» (the Arca Basement theatre). This company was the offshoot of an active and stimulating local drama school. For many years it had the most advanced repertoire imaginable, and although since 1965 Ghent has again had its own professional company, the «Arca-Kelderteater» still survives. It was this company in fact which, in 1965, provided the official theatre with its first director and most of its best actors.



«Thyestes», a play by Hugo Claus
first performed by «Toneel Vanden

THEATRE IN BRUSSELS

After Ghent, Brussels too acquired its "chamber theatre", under the impetus of a group of gifted young people, most of them Flemish. Unfortunately this company only lasted a few years. Much later, in 1965, another Brussels "chamber theatre" was formed by a young Catholic producer who also taught drama. The company adopted its own personal, somewhat literary style, and performed avant-garde plays.

In 1965, with the support of the Ministry of Culture, another Dutch-language theatre opened in the capital city, despite the fact that Dutch is the language most widely spoken there. The "Beursschouwburg" was intended to be used solely as the venue for the various Flemish theatrical companies visiting Brussels, and mostly these companies paid a share of the expenses. At present, however, it seems as though the "Beursschouwburg" is about to form its own troupe, specializing in comedies.

The company called "Toneel Vandaag" (The Theatre Today) no longer exists, but should nevertheless be mentioned here. It was an itinerant company from Brussels, and its actors were keen exponents of everything that was new and bold in the theatre. They were particularly interested in the often eccentric experiments that the young Dutch playwrights were conducting at the time. Rudi van Vlaenderen, the founder and director of "Toneel Vandaag", is now the director of the "Rijksinstituut voor Toneel en Cultuursprei-

ding", or R.I.T.C.S. (Higher National Institute for Theatrical Art and Culture).

This is a higher educational establishment designed to train young people for a whole range of activities connected with the theatre or kindred disciplines.

It was "Toneel Vandaag" which initiated the organization in Brussels of "Middagen van Toneel" (Lunchtime theatre). These "Middagen van Toneel" were aimed chiefly at bringing the latest theatrical trends to the notice of office workers and civil servants during their luncheon interval.

EQUALLY INTENSE ACTIVITY IN ANTWERP

In 1953, Antwerp followed suit with the creation of the «Teater op Zolder» (The Attic Theatre) which, under its present name of «Nederlands Kamertoneel» (Dutch language Chamber Theatre) has become a professional company. The «Nederlands Kamertoneel» is able not only to compete with the three official establishments but is in fact fulfilling a dual function. Under its second name, of «Groot Limburgs Toneel» (Great Limburg Theatre) it has a permanent base at the theatre of the city of Maastricht, in Holland, providing both the Belgian and Dutch regions of Limburg with top-level performances by professional actors. The Belgian province of Limburg had until then been sadly deprived of this kind of performance. As the «Nederlands Kamertoneel», the company continues at the same time, to provide top-grade and highly successful entertainment. There were several changes of management and repertoire between the early days when the company used to act in a bohemian attic, the time when it moved to a mini-theatre in the heart of Antwerp, and the moment when it settled in a spacious, well equipped hall. The repertoire ranged from the avant-garde to the popular, leading subsequently to a more balanced choice of works, with a preponderance of contemporary plays. Thanks to its high standards, the «Nederlands Kamertoneel» which, as we have seen, is also the «Groot Limburgs Toneel», can be rated as one of the best Belgian theatrical companies performing in the

Dutch language, and it receives financial support from both Holland and Belgium. At the same time as «chamber theatres» were springing up, a number of young authors, who will be mentioned further on, were also writing their first plays.

After the first venture of the «Nederlands Kamertoneel», Antwerp was able to welcome other new members of the «chamber theatre family»: «De Experimentele Werkgroep voor Toneel» (The Experimental Theatre), which was launched in 1959, and which concentrates the «theatre of the absurd» and stark productions. Because of its boldness, the merits of this group have not always been properly recognized, but it has benefited from the active understanding of one of the Antwerp municipal authorities. «De Experimentele Werkgroep voor Toneel» has now become a suburban theatre with a more eclectic but still original repertoire.

The «Fakkeltheater» (Torch theatre) is another theatrical venture which took root in the city of Antwerp. It had started as an amateur group consisting mainly of teachers. Proud of the fact that it has attained truly professional standards, the «Fakkeltheater» openly admits it is a committed company. Preferably its programmes consist of socially significant plays, dramatic and humanistic in inspiration. But in order to balance its budget, it does from time to time present plays which are straightforward entertainment. The young intellectuals formed the «Fakkeltheater» set out to fill a gap in Flemish theatrical life and to present it with a message. In this they have succeeded and they are working as hard now as they were in the past.

the other companies already mentioned, also go on tour, and the «Fakkelteater» was the only company which was bold enough to perform «The Vicar» by Hochhuth, in the Flemish area.

The «Laboratorium voor Vlaams Toneel» (Experimental centre for the Flemish theatre), another Antwerp venture, did not prove long-lived and only survived for two years. It aimed to produce only original works by Dutch-language playwrights, preferably novices. Its early demise was due in part to insufficient outside help and also to a certain lack of vigour in its internal organization.

OTHER GROWTH IN THE PROVINCES

In Ghent, Brussels and Antwerp, modest professional companies began to emerge in other provincial cities too: at Courtrai, the «Antigone» (Antigone Theatre) founded in 1954, concentrates in particular on theatre in French; in Bruges, the «Korrekeldeater» (Korrekelder theatre) is at present working in cooperation with the «Arca-Kelderteater» (Arca-Kelder theatre); in Malines, the «Mechels Miniatuur» (Malines Miniature Theatre) which also sprang from a school of drama in 1956, thanks to the initiative of a talented actor and producer, Luc Philips, who was one of the courses in the local school, has succeeded in the proliferation of «chamber thea-

tres» but the small companies formed there were mostly short-lived, either because the promoters were lacking in perseverance and drive, or because they could not command sufficient material support to survive.

VERENIGING VAN VLAAMSE TONEELAUTEURS

One event was particularly decisive in the renovation process of the Flemish theatre. In 1956, there was a complete change in the association which Nestor de Tière had set up at the beginning of the century and which was called «Bond van Vlaamse Toneelschrijvers» (Union of Flemish Playwrights). Under its new name of «Vereniging van Vlaamse Toneelauteurs» (Association of Flemish Playwrights), the association set itself a number of new targets which can be summed up as follows: preserving friendship and solidarity between its members, developing and promoting their artistic, moral and material interests, encouraging original drama in the Dutch language and, lastly, enhancing the influence of this language. Members were invited to submit their works to a selection and advisory committee which was formed within the Association. This commission consisted of authoritative critics who had no ties with the Association itself, and were empowered to issue a binding favourable opinion. Such a decision then led the Association to ensure that the play which the Com-

mission had approved, was put into production by a professional company. «*Tee drinken*» (While drinking tea), by Jan Christiaens, was one such work. Others soon followed. This system was later taken over, in modified form, by the Ministry of Culture. At the beginning there were about eighty members in the Association. Far more applied, but not always successfully.

The Association of Flemish Playwrights also gave as much financial support as possible to the organization of play-writing competitions. It assisted amateur companies which showed an interest in original Flemish works. More recently, contact was established with Dutch playwrights, leading to useful talks and valuable collaboration. One patronage prize, which is awarded annually, now goes alternately to a Flemish and a Dutch writer.

GREAT STRIDES

It is no exaggeration to say that after 1945 to be more exact, after 1950, Flemish theatre life, under the impetus of bold and talented enthusiasts who had begun their work in theatre between the wars, blossomed as never had in the past.

The professional theatre was changing and developing, but not always to the advantage of Flemish playwrights, whose works often suffered with the authorities' indifference. Foreigners were often invited to stage plays for Belgian companies performing in Dutch, and thus to test their concepts of stagecraft to the test. It came not only from Holland and France, also from Britain, Germany and even Czechoslovakia and Russia.

By the same token, Flemish stage directors went to stage plays abroad, mainly in Holland and Germany but also in Britain and South Africa.

After 1955, Flemish actors gradually began to leave Belgium to settle in Holland, and the exodus assumed such proportions that official measures were taken to stem the flow.

The growth of the Dutch-language theatre in Belgium naturally had a beneficial effect on Flemish dramatic writing. In this field too, a policy of cultural exchange with foreign countries yielded substantial results. Particular interest was shown in the American theatre which was experimenting with new forms. Techniques borrowed from the cinema, including the flash-back, lent the plays new dimensions, and were eagerly welcomed. Neo-

poetry theatre and a revised type of
magat-from-life play, without beginning or end,
rather like a passing glance through a window,
were all styles that had a following in Flan-
der 1945. There was a vogue for plays with a
theatrical message or plays on audacious subjects.
talented amateur dramatics, which had such
work in the past, were suffering somewhat unfor-
unately as a result of the repercussions from the evolution in the
theatre. The amateur companies lost many
actors as well as some of their audien-
ces, because the professional companies had
often managed to expand their repertoires.
The amateur tradition however was strong
enough to enable them to weather the crisis,
though some companies broke up or
merged. They realized that the standard of
performances had to be raised, that tech-
niques had to be brought up to date and
that productions had to meet stringent con-
ditions. The best of the amateur companies
succeeded in making the necessary changes,
either by recruiting foremost directors. Deleg-
ates of their associations established contact
with amateur companies abroad, and Flemish
groups paid several visits to similar com-
panies in neighbouring countries. Occasionally
they went even further afield than the
professional companies, despite the fact that
these were far more experienced. In the
Dutch-language area of Belgium, amateur
theatrical groups had flourished through the centur-
ies and had fought honourably to preserve
the Flemish cultural heritage, even at the dark-
est moments of history. That which it succeed-
ed in doing in the past, it will still be able to
do tomorrow. Not a village in Flanders is
without its enthusiasts, who will spend endless

time and take endless trouble to put on per-
formances, often under the most rudimentary
conditions. It may be that the repertoire or
actual performances are not always of the
highest calibre, but it has to be admitted that
amateur dramatics fulfil an important role in
the field of popular education. The continuity of
Flemish awareness depends to a larger extent
on the amateur theatre, with its tireless zeal,
than on the professional theatre, no matter how
great its recent progress.

THE NEW GENERATION OF PLAYWRIGHTS

Before attempting any analysis in depth of the
work of the most important playwrights of the
past ten years, we should mention two authors
of particular interest, who wrote directly in the
experimental, avant-garde spirit already refer-
red to. They are Piet Sterckx and Jan Chris-
tiaens. The former made his debut with and
owed his success to the «Nederlands Kamer-
toneel». Then he disappeared suddenly from
theatrical life, at the very time when his talent
had come to be generally recognized. The lat-
ter also began his career with the «Nederlands
Kamertoneel», but seems to have sufficient
resources still to go on writing for the stage.
However, the manner he has adopted now
differs somewhat from the one that brought
him fame.

Piet STERCKX, born in 1925, was a little-known journalist from Antwerp when his first play «*De Verdwaalde Plant*» (The stray plant) was performed by the «Nederlands Kamertoneel», shortly after the company was formed. At first, some regarded him as a disciple of Ionesco or Beckett. «*De Verdwaalde Plant*» caused surprise by its subtly absurd dialogue and its confused, barely intelligible theme, vaguely reminiscent of Pirandello. The story of a man who disappears in winter, like some hibernating plant, is more than somewhat unusual.

Piet Sterckx never succeeded in explaining this work, nor for that matter could he explain the next one. He even claimed that the theatre did not interest him. Even so, he wrote play upon play, and the «Nederlands Kamertoneel» was always happy to perform them. Four of his works were produced and often, by their own admission, neither the actors nor the author understood what they were about. Piet Sterckx won the Triennial State Prize for the Theatre for the period 1954-1957, but the jury's decision was by no means unanimous.

Piet Sterckx wrote other works, including «*De Gelijkbenigen*» (Similar sides) which is stronger in every respect than its predecessors. It was at that moment that he disappeared suddenly from theatrical life and, at present, no theatrical company is showing any further interest in his work. Piet Sterckx was doubtless the product of a dramatic concept that was still too young and was seeking its maturity.

Jan CHRISTIAENS, born in 1929, was a slower starter than Sterckx but was doubtless more profound as well. He began by writing a one-act play for the «Eperimentele Werkgroep voor Toneel» (The Experimental Theatre) long

before this company had found a permanent home. Then, thanks to a decisive recommendation from the «Vereniging van Vlaamse Toneelauteurs» (Association of Flemish Playwrights) the first of his full-length works «*Te drinken*» (While drinking tea), which dates from 1958, was included in the programme of the «Arca-Kelderteater» in Ghent. In «*Te drinken*» the writer warns against the dangers of state control pushed to extreme lengths, emphasizes human imperfection and that every conceivable form of political organization.

This first success seems to have spoiled Jan Christiaens and may explain the looseness of his subsequent work «*Een Vredesduif braden*» (Cooking the dove of peace) which he wrote in 1959 and which shows traces of haste and carelessness. This sketch of a minor employee who is the victim of his chiefs, is too abstract. Jan Christiaens has also written another play which has not yet been performed. Meanwhile another one-acter entitled «*De Beestentra*» (The cattle train), which is often performed in Flanders, testifies to his very real gifts as a dramatic writer.

THE BRULIN

Tone Brulin, who was born in Antwerp in 1921, is one of the most eclectic Flemish writers of the present time. He was one of the first, if not the first, to embark on bold new theatrical ventures. His experiments, which are concerned mainly with form, may appear gratuitous at first sight, but when confronted with theatrical realities they never fail to astound the most sceptical audiences with their great dramatic effectiveness. Tone Brulin moved on and also wrote more traditional works which brought him great success, even though they were never devoid of experiment and fantasy. This writer, who has travelled far and wide, has had his plays performed in many European countries. Tone Brulin attended almost any school of dramatic art in which he thought it would be possible to further his theatrical training. In Brussels he attended the Conservatoire and was a member for some time of the «Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg», in Antwerp he performed at the «Jeugdteater» and he was one of the first students accepted for the «Studio» of the «Nationaal Toneel» (see above). As an actor he took part in several tours in Germany. Afterwards he spent some time in Scandinavia and in Czechoslovakia. He visited the U.S. on a study tour, and worked for three months as an assistant in the Drama Department of the University of Denver. By means of a Fulbright scholarship, he stayed two months in

Britain, where he spent most of his time at Stratford-on-Avon which, as everyone knows, is Shakespeare country. He spent some time in South Africa, where he staged several plays. He returned to Europe via Ghana, where he married the daughter of a tribal chief. Brulin has also visited many other countries, sometimes only to attend the first night of one of his plays.

Although Brulin has mainly had an actor's training, he is not particularly gifted in this field. He moved backstage, and then began writing for the theatre. He has also directed programmes for the Dutch-language television service in Belgium.

Most of his works were so bold and experimental that it was virtually impossible to stage them. They were published either in periodicals or in book form. Recognition came in 1953, at the time of the opening of the «Nederlands Kamertoneel», of which he was one of the founder members. For its first performance, this company staged five of Brulin's one act plays, with the author himself as director and as a member of the cast.

These five playlets illustrated the manifold facets of his talent, for they ranged from the tragic to the comic and even to the absurd, and also included a venture into the subconscious.

His debut in the official theatre took place in 1955 and 1956, but even before then his one act plays had been included in special programmes. «Nu het dorp niet meer bestaat» (Now that the village no longer exists) is his first full-length play. The subject is based on an inspiration that came to him when visiting Czechoslovakia.



«Potopot» by Tone Brulin.

The play, which was written in 1949, appeared in a volume containing traditional works together with others representing the «theatre of the absurd». «Nu het dorp niet meer bestaat» deals with the tragic fate of the small village of Oradour-sur-Glane, in Czechoslovakia which, like the village of Oradour-sur-Glane, was razed to the ground, in retaliation for the assassination of the German Governor-General Heydrich. After the liberation, the German major who ordered the massacre takes refuge in a neighbouring castle, while the Communist resistance fighter who shot the Governor-General returns to the site of the ruined village. The dramatic tension created by the confrontation between these two antagonists is not depicted logically but is nevertheless highly charged with emotion.

«Nu het dorp niet meer bestaat» is not a play which is committed to either the right or the left but is concerned solely with the problem of human justice.

One play succeeded another, and Tone Brulin began to apply the practice that was already being used abroad, of making each performance a decisive test for the play. In some cases this obliged the author to rewrite or alter the play. Tone Brulin's works have not all been staged as yet, either in Belgium or abroad: this is not always the playwright's fault, and is due essentially to the indifference of theatre managers.

Tone Brulin who, as already mentioned, has the habit of rewriting plays even after they have already been staged, wrote a play for television called «Pas op, Mijnheer Lipman komt» (Careful, Mr. Lipman is coming). He wrote several versions of it, as well as an

adaptation for television. Later «Pas op, Mijnheer Lipman komt» became a stage play which the «Nationaal Toneel» performed with the author himself as director.

The plot of this play, in which there are only three characters, is too complex to be related here. It is a psychological drama invoking several themes: the individual's fight against repression, anxiety (the whole work is set in an anguished atmosphere), love, and the fascination of chance meetings, marital fidelity and the haphazard nature of relationships that may threaten a couple's happiness. The author describes it as a tragedy of cowardice. It differs from traditional Flemish works in both form and content, and it displays none of the usual characteristics.

«Pas op, Mijnheer Lipman komt» was a valuable contribution to Belgian dramatic literature in Dutch, and it was awarded the Triennial State Prize for the Theatre.

«Pas op, Mijnheer Lipman komt» foreshadowed Tone Brulin's subsequent concern with the problems of racial discrimination. He had lived in the Congo and in South Africa, and later wrote several plays drawn from his experiences there: «Potopot» and «Schildknaap van een Vechtjas» (Attendant to violence), a less accomplished work. Both were first performed by the «Nederlands Kamertoneel» and deal with the relations between whites and negroes. Before writing «De Honden» (The dogs), his most impassioned work about race relationships, based on an event that actually happened in South Africa, he found time to concoct a thriller-in-reverse «Nonkel en de Juke-box» (Uncle and the juke-box). Although «De Honden» was an earlier work than «Poto-

pot» and «*Schildknaap van een Vechtjas*», it was not staged until 1961, by the «Nationaal Toneel».

Tone Brulin, who does not revere art for art's sake, believes that the playwright's craft is closer to that of the reporter than of the researcher or inventor.

Both its characters and its theme make «*De Honden*» into a strikingly realistic piece of reporting. A police inspector and his assistant are instructed by the South African authorities to investigate the mysterious disappearance of several coloured men who had been sentenced to forced labour in an agricultural settlement. The investigation leads to a number of highly disturbing revelations, with racial factors in the foreground. Although Brulin has couched his play mainly in the form of a thriller, he also provides a penetrating analysis of the relationship between a father and his children — two sons and a daughter. Equally penetrating is his rendering of the anachronistic concept of paternal authority and the education of young people, making an old peasant character into a real potentate.

«*De Honden*» aroused political repercussions — at the diplomatic level to be more precise. These however did not prevent the play being performed again repeatedly abroad, for the message which it contains is valid in other countries too. Brulin afterwards dropped the racial theme and reverted to experimental works. Expressionism too tempted him anew, and he wrote an appealing satire «*In Aanwezigheid van de Minister...*» (In the presence of the Minister...). So far however, none of his later plays have attained the level of the three analysed above. His latest offering «*Haasje-*

over in West-Berlijn» (Leap-frog in West Berlin) was staged by the author himself at the «Nationaal Toneel», but it aroused little interest because it was too obscure and hastily composed.

Tone Brulin has not yet revealed the full measure of his talent.

CLAUS

(Leap-frog in West Berlin author himself at the age of 17 it aroused little interest in the obscure and hastily con-

and, and also in the French and Dutch areas of Belgium, Hugo Claus who in 1929 is regarded as an outstanding writer who has displayed equal talent in poetry and novels, and in his writings for theatre and the cinema. His success can be explained partly by his unusual personality, more precise, by his particularly incisive view of the confined world that gravitates around the Scheldt and the Meuse, but it is due also to his remarkable verbal genius.

Claus was already well established in the speaking areas when he first tackled theatre. The drama has since then acquired much appeal for him, that he has of late more writing for the theatre than for other medium.

He won the Triennial State Prize for the first time for his first play *«Een Bruid in de Morgen»* (A bride in the morning), which he wrote at the age of twenty-four and which, having first performed in Holland, was staged in Belgium by the «Nationaal Toneel». The next year Claus were all staged in Holland and then in Belgium. He had established a friendship with Ton Lutz, a Dutch director, and this probably explains his decision to have his plays shown in the first. Ton Lutz thus became the first director of Claus's plays.

As regards to the novels of Hugo Claus, it has to be said that they are akin to the work of the American novelists of to-day, and his

plays have at times been compared to those of Tennessee Williams. This is valid in so far as Claus mingles realism and poetry in his work. But everything he writes is dominated by a verbal magnificence which sometimes weakens his plays, particularly those depicting uncouth bumpkins and brigands, whose speech he renders far too literary.

«Een Bruid in de Morgen», his first work, which many regard as his masterpiece, is similar in subject to his first novel *«De Metsiers»* (Duck hunting), which deals with an abnormal relationship between a sister and her retarded brother, living in a depraved family. In *«Een Bruid in de Morgen»* there is apparent incest too but what is actually involved is a very pure poetic tie between a sister and her hypersensitive, somewhat naive brother. The mother has immoral schemes, and wants to marry her son off to one of her nieces who is older than he is. Andrea, the sister, resists this plan with all her might, and when she realizes that she cannot prevent the marriage and that she will lose her brother, she kills herself. To some extent Hugo Claus disconcerted Flemish audiences, who were at that time somewhat chary of topics out of tune with the prevailing moral tenets.

One year after *«Een Bruid in de Morgen»*, *«Het Lied van de Moordenaar»* (The murderer's song), another new play by Claus had its first showing in Holland. It deals with a gang of robbers that had been legendary in the 1880's. Their leader, who is idolized by his men, falls in love with a baroness and this leads to his downfall. The play did not arouse any enthusiasm, either at its first showing in Holland nor subsequently in Antwerp and Brussels.

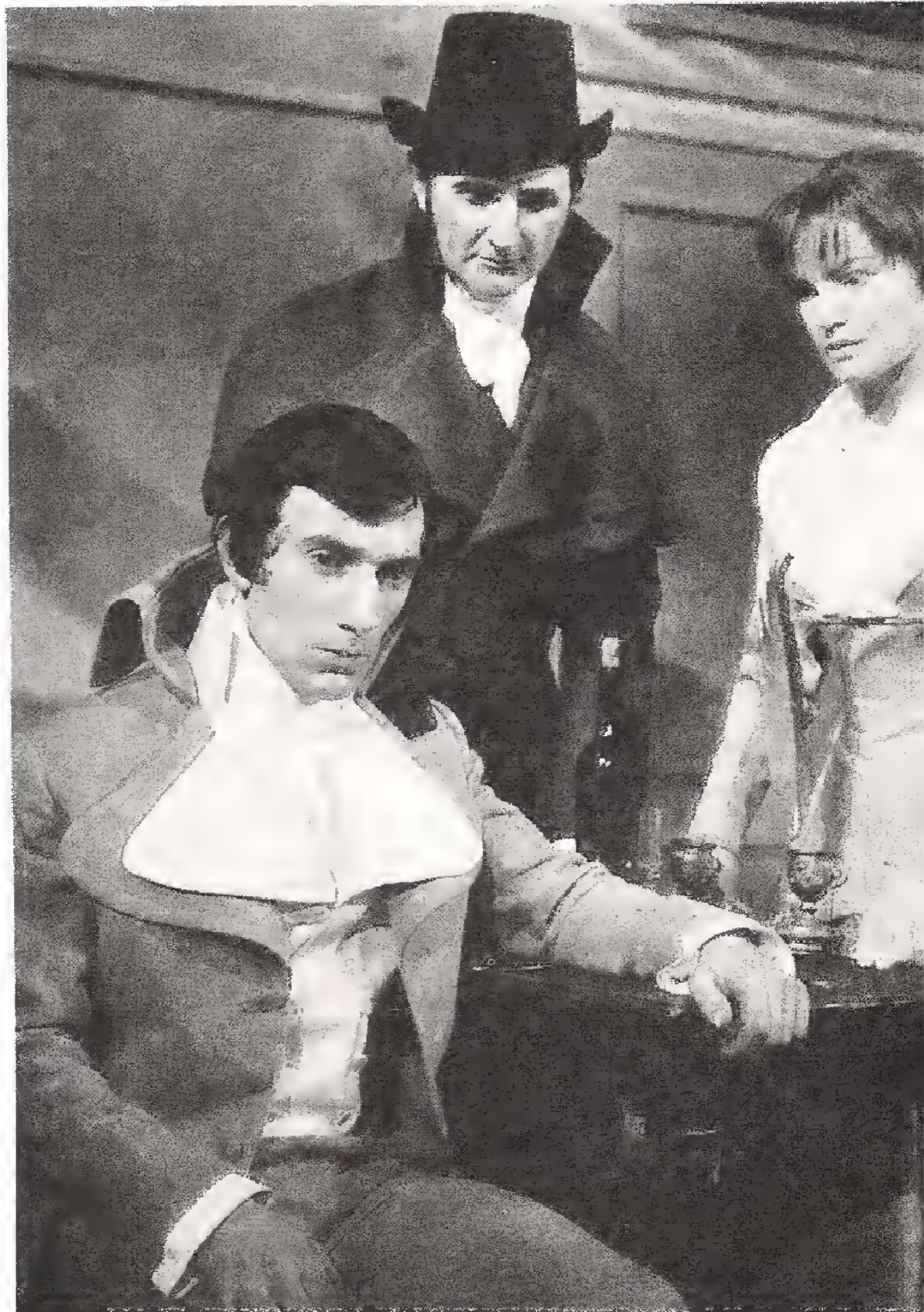
«*Suiker*» (Sugar), the third play which Claus wrote, restored and enhanced his reputation. «*Suiker*» is a naturalist play set in the barracks erected for Flemish border workers who pick the sugar-beet harvest in the North of France. The author had come to know this kind of life during the years he spent roaming about Europe. A prostitute who sells her charms to the seasonal workers hopes to find salvation in her love for a simple Flemish «coolie», known as Kilo. He loves her too, but knows nothing of her past. One of the other men in the barracks, who realizes he is losing the girl, tells Kilo the truth and encourages him to murder her, but in the end Kilo decides to work for the young woman's salvation. The coarseness of the atmosphere and roughness of the characters in this play are redeemed by its many amusing touches and its bitter-sweet humour. Like «*Een Bruid in de Morgen*», «*Suiker*» has been shown in many foreign theatres, has been performed in Paris and even in the U.S.A., but there it proved less successful than expected.

Next came «*Kijk, Mama, zonder handen*» (Look Mummy, no hands) an «absurd» comedy which did not have its first showing in Holland until later. «*De Dans van de Reiger*» (The heron's dance), which followed, was a fairly amusing philosophical tale about romantic love lost in the human jungle of eroticism. Claus seemed unable to attain the same high standards as he had in his first plays. «*Tijl*», an adaptation of Charles De Coster's Uylenspiegel legend, was staged as a lavish production, while the adaptation of «*Het Goudland*» (The gold country), an adventure story by Hendrik Conscience, was a total flop. The author then raised Seneca

from oblivion and recreated the dreadful tragedy of «*Thyestes*», which had a mixed reception and the merit of which resides in its literary quality. It was performed at the Holland Festival by the «Toneel Vandaag» company, was shown also at the International Theatre Festival in Paris.

The work of Hugo Claus, as a writer for stage and screen, is a matter of interest throughout the whole of Belgium.

The sensation of the 1969-1970 season was his play «*Vrijdag*» (Friday), in which he explores the nature of the common man in Flanders and attains a directness of style that makes perhaps his finest work.



«The word freedom»
by Herwig Hensen.

HERWIG HENSEN

Herwig Hensen, born in 1917, is a unique case in Flemish drama and literature. His case is unique not only because of his scientific background (he was a teacher of mathematics) combined with the fact that he is a good poet, but also because he has written some of the best constructed, though highly cerebral plays of the Flemish theatre. Even so he is not sufficiently appreciated, if of course appreciation is to be gauged by the number of times his already considerable volume of works has been performed. For a long time Herwig Hensen locked himself up in an ivory tower, refused all publicity and never submitted any plays to theatrical managements. It is his contention that it is the manager's role to look out interesting works, and that all he need do is make sure his plays are published. Herwig Hensen began by writing poetry. His first volume appeared in 1936, it was soon followed by others, and in 1940 he won the Triennial State Prize for Poetry. «Antonio», his first play, had its maiden performance at the official theatre in Ghent. «Antonio» was the prelude to a series of works including «Lady Godiva», «Don Juan», «Koningin Christina» (Queen Christina), «Polukrates» (Polycrates), «Alkestis» (Alcestis), «Agamemnoon» (Agamemnon), «Hannibal» and «De andere Jehanne» (The other Jehanne). This list is by no means exhaustive, and some of his plays have never been staged as yet. Ghent was the first to discover him, so far his work has only been shown once in Brussels, and finally it was with Ant-

werp audiences that Hensen found the favour. The value of his work is such, however, as to merit far greater acclaim. The «Nationaal Toneel» of Antwerp has performed some of his plays, and his «Agamemnoon» has been staged several times by the drama students at «Studio».

As their titles show, all these works are of a purely classical form and deal with historical events which the author uses to illustrate his philosophy. At the beginning, carnal love was the principal theme. In later plays this was replaced by the concept of death as a release, which strong characters accept as an offering symbolizing their revolt against tradition and the conventions.

Herwig Hensen has a profound admiration for Shakespeare, and it is possible to detect in his works an echo of the famous English playwright's style and construction. Hensen's philosophy however is derived from Nietzsche. In 1948, he won the Triennial State Prize for Theatre. Three years ago, he resigned his post as a teacher of mathematics in order to lecture on dramatic art at the «Rijkshooger Instituut voor Toneel en Cultuurspreiding» (Higher National Institute for Theatrical Art and Culture).

The writer, who uses historical themes to subject contemporary problems and modern philosophical concepts, has also written plays with a topical social message. In «Het Worden Vrijheid» (The word freedom) he shows that man can be caught up in the wheels of revolution and that from that time onwards no man is free: individual liberty is dead. In one of his rare realist plays, «Morgen kan het te laat zijn» (Tomorrow may be too late) he conveys the same message, although it is pre-

Hansen found the most ~~in~~ a defective story. It is a warning against his work is such, however, ~~the~~ of individual freedom, against the dan-
 acclaim. The «Nation» ~~it~~ can being ensnared in the chaos of a
 has performed some of ~~the~~ that has fallen prey to increasingly con-
 «room» has been stage ~~the~~ ideologies.

Drama students at ~~the~~ Hensen is a writer of considerable sta-
 these works are of ~~the~~ for the fact that his work is so little per-
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 gining, carnal love ~~the~~ traps that his dialogue lacks superfi-
 In later plays this ~~the~~ need, it stands out for its far more pro-
 of death as a relea ~~the~~ qualities, its artistry of the apt expres-
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the famous English pla
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 and Culture).

VAN HOECK

Historical themes to pr
 ems and modern pla
 has also written play
 «Høgh». In «Het Woon
 edom) he shows how
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 «National Toneel» with a «conju-
 at time onwards no m
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 is dead. In one ~~the~~ of the plot was left to chance, and
 «Morgen kan het te la
 «Sauternes 1921» nevertheless won a
 although it is prese
 awards.

Three years later, in 1957, his «Voorlopig Von-
 nis» (Provisional sentence) created a sensa-
 tion. The play was cleverly contrived, but bene-
 fited also from its outstanding production by
 the lamented Fred Engelen, at the «Nationaal
 Toneel». «Voorlopig Vonnis» was based on the
 saga of the atomic spy Klaus Fuchs, a topic
 that had already been treated for the stage by
 Carl Zuckmayer. Jozef Van Hoeck gave it more
 original treatment, for his play consists of only
 three characters, one of whom depicts several
 different types of individuals, expresses opi-
 nions and, to some extent, serves as a chorus.
 It also uses screen techniques such as the
 flash-back and the leap into the future, which
 give the work its own particular flavour. Al-
 though the first part of «Voorlopig Vonnis»
 smacks at times of the serial story, the latter
 part is intensely dramatic. The play proved ex-
 tremely successful, and has been translated
 and shown in many foreign languages. The wri-
 ter's next play, «Appartement te Huur» (Apartment to let), was another conjugal drama pat-
 terned on Ibsen, with an audacious topic and
 many flash-backs.

It did not enjoy the same success as «Voor-
 lopig Vonnis»; it was not as original as the
 preceding play, although it was perhaps better
 constructed and more powerful. «Appartement
 te Huur» won the Triennial State Prize for the
 Theatre which, in truth, should have gone to
 Van Hoeck for his previous work.

His last play «De Raad van Beheer» (The board
 of directors) has not fulfilled the hopes which
 the writer's earlier works had aroused.

LUC VILSEN

Luc Vilsen, born in 1921, had already published some novels, as well as a play that was performed by the «Reizend Volkstheater», when recognition came to him through the recommendation to the «Nationaal Toneel» of his «passion play» *«Het Eeuwige Sanhedrin»* (The eternal Sanhedrin) by the «Vereniging van Vlaamse Toneelacteurs» (Association of Flemish Playwrights). *«Het Eeuwige Sanhedrin»* was particularly well staged by the «Koninklijke Nederlandse Schouwburg» in Antwerp.

Luc Vilsen is attracted by dramatic themes resulting from the relationship between religion and politics. His first work contained a number of errors of construction, and its successor *«De genaemde Greco»* (The man named Greco) was first written for broadcasting and then adapted for television. In the theatre, the play made a good impression when it was first performed in a good production by the «Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg» in Brussels. It relates the famous Greek painter's experiences under the dreaded Spanish Inquisition. The play has also been performed in Paris.

In *«Storm over Firenze»* (Storm over Florence) a work based on the strange and fascinating character Savonarole, Luc Vilsen again tackles the same subject but, despite the hard work he put into this play, it did not attain the same effect. The play, which is imbued with great dramatic intensity, starts well but flags towards the end.

The final scene of *«Storm over Firenze»* is not in the best of taste and was hotly debated at the time of its first showing in Brussels. The writer has since then rewritten it in parts. So-

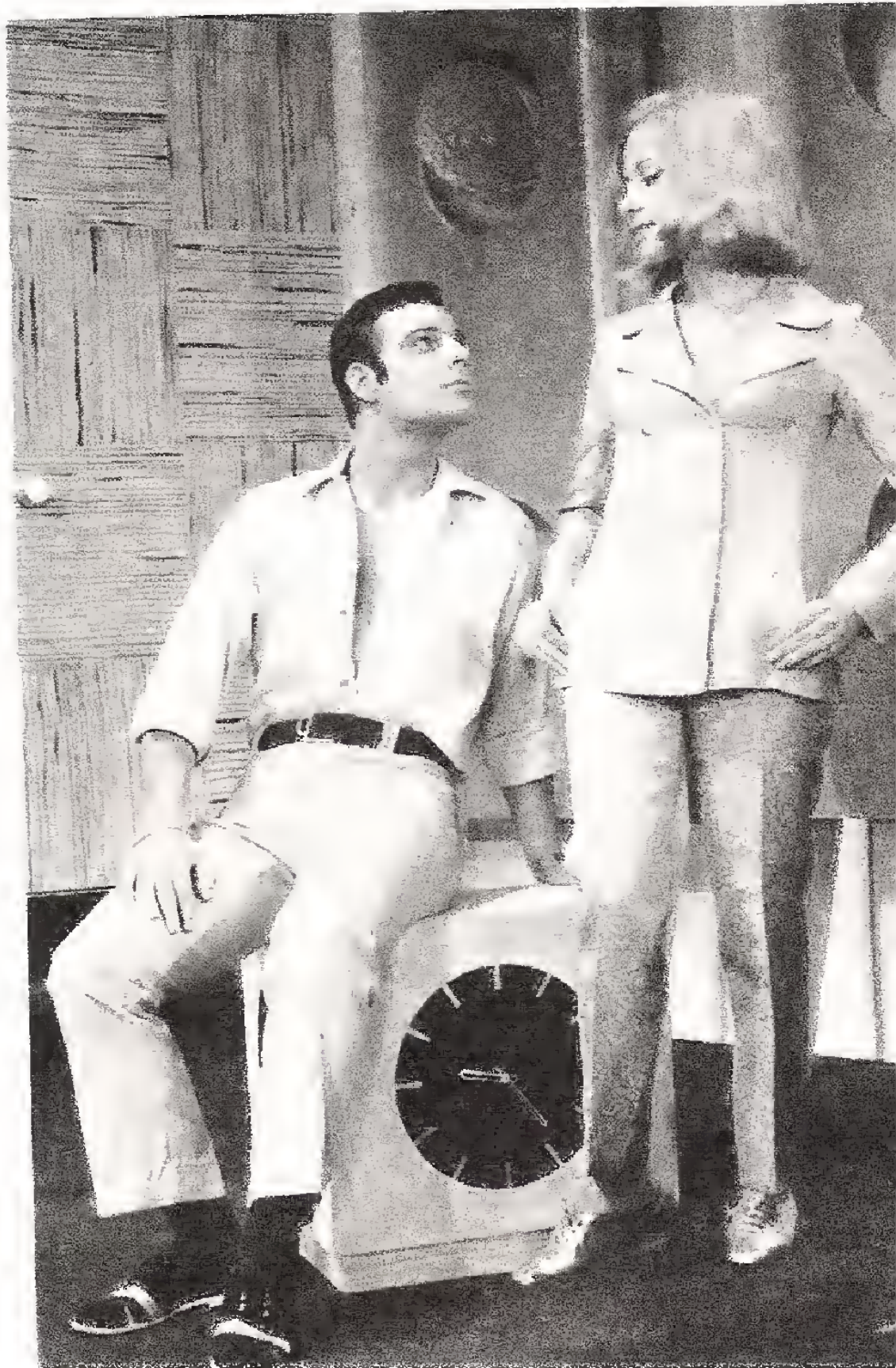
me critics do not recognize Luc Vilsen as writer of the first rank, but others maintain *«Storm over Firenze»* contains passages which show a sure and thorough knowledge of drama.

STAF KNOP

Staf Knop, born in 1921, specializes in a comedy in which Flemish writers rarely succeed, namely the farce. Working first as a journalist in the capital city, he performed in amateur companies and was one of the founders of the «Brusselse Kamertonneel» (Brussels Chamber Theatre), became and still is the favourite author of Brussels «Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg». He began by writing an unpretentious comedy *«De Knecht»* (The valet), which has often been performed in Flanders. Staf Knop, who followed in the footsteps of Paul Géraldy and even more of André Roussin, then produced a number of marital comedies : *«De Vruhet Huwelijk»* (The fruits of marriage), *«Mijn Geweten en Ik»* (My conscience and I). This latter play is widely thought to be his best yet. It has been performed in Paris and is now being shown on television as a musical comedy. It contains four characters : a couple of young people who are torn by futile quarrels, and the father and mother, who are the embodiment of their consciences. The result is a musical comedy which is perfectly balanced as a musical.

The author's latest works *«Nana»* and *«Jeder Posthuum»* (The late Alexander) have received somewhat disappointing but nevertheless good reviews. Staf Knop remains a writer of light comedy, to whom much can still be expected.

«The late Alexander»
by Staf Knop.



PIETER DE PRINS

Some writers from the Dutch-language area of Belgium have had their works performed both at home and abroad, even though they have not yet been shown in any of the three official Flemish theatres. This is no fault of theirs.

Among this small group, Pieter De Prins, born in 1926, is a particularly striking case in point. While working as a young journalist, De Prins began writing poetry and won several official awards. He began writing for the theatre towards the year 1954, resorting for some time to the collaboration of an accomplished actor, Oscar Ferket, who was well versed in theatrical techniques. Some seven or eight plays emerged in this way, and several of them won acclaim in Holland.

Next Pieter De Prins wrote one-act plays which apparently were better liked abroad than in Belgium. In particular we should quote «*De Stoel*» (The chair) and «*De Gieren*» (Vultures), which have won various awards and a French translation of which has appeared in «*L'Avant-Scène*», a theatrical review published in Paris. «*De Stoel*» has been performed in France, while «*De Gieren*» has been performed in French in a Brussels pocket theatre and, in its original Dutch-language version, was later included in the repertoire of the Antwerp «*Fakkelteater*». «*De Gieren*» had also been shown on Flemish television and in Chile, in Italy and, repeatedly, in Holland. Other works by Pieter De Prins have also been translated into several languages and have aroused interest in foreign countries.

«*Andreas Vesalius*», his most recent play based on the life of this famous Flemish doctor of the Renaissance period, who fathered the science of anatomy. «*Andreas Vesalius*» had its successful first performance by the «*Vlaamse Centrum voor Nederlandstalige Dramaturgie*» (Flemish Drama Centre), which was founded by the Association of Flemish Playwrights to promote the performance of original works written in the Dutch language.

FRANS COOLS

Frans Cools, born in 1923, is an interesting writer who produced some ten plays in a short time. He prefers to write thrillers and for this reason perhaps, has become one of the Flemish writers whose works have been frequently performed recently. However, his latest work «*Diagnose genezen*» (Diagnosis cured), which earned him an official prize, is a thriller but a marital drama. It has been performed by the «*Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg*» in Brussels. Frans Cools is a writer for the future.

OTHER NAMES

Some playwrights, who have had one or more plays performed by the «Nationaal Toneel» or other companies, have not written anything for the theatre since, or have for professional reasons turned in other directions. This has been the case with Johan DAISNE, Marcel COLE, Liane BRUYLANTS, Andries POPPE, Aeros VAN ROEY, Jan VAN DEN BRANDE, Jan DEUREN, Valeer VAN KERCKHOVEN and Willy de SCHUTTER (who has also devised ingenious games for the Antwerp «Jeugdtheater»). They can be mentioned here in their capacity of playwrights thanks to the efforts of Fernin Mortier who, for seventeen years, managed the «Nationaal Toneel» and gave many writers their opportunity.

Walter EYSSELINCK, Paul BERKENMAN and Georges VAN VREKHEM are all writers of promise but not yet sufficiently experienced. The work of all three has drawn attention thanks to the performance of their plays by the small companies. «De dood van twee Dames» (The death of two ladies) by Georges Van Vrekhem was first shown by the Gent «Nationaal Toneel Gent» during its 1967-68 season, and the author has since then become this company's theatrical adviser.

«Cassandra» by Walter Eysselinck, was first shown by this same company during its 1968-69 season, but neither play proved convincing.

THE FUTURE

In Belgium the style and the structure of dramatic works written in the Dutch language, influenced as they are by the cinema, by television and by other modern techniques, have evolved to such an extent that they are arousing ever greater interest in the theatre. Regrettably however, dramatic art still appeals almost solely to the intellectuals and the group that might be called semi-intellectual. The popular mass is not yet sufficiently attracted by the theatre.

Since 1945 the Dutch-language theatre in Belgium has relinquished its traditions and constant factors, both as regards acting methods and the actual literature. The Flemish theatre has made its contribution to the international theatrical evolution.

The indications are that, if the State accepts its responsibility, the Flemish theatre, the theatre in that part of the country which used to be called Flanders, will be able to fill an enviable place in the world's dramatic literature.

In 1889 it was said of Hendrik Ibsen that «this man is dominating the world thanks to Norwegian, the language of a small country». It is our hope and wish that one day the same may be said of the Dutch language. That is what the future will show.

Paul VAN MORCKHOVEN.



PAUL VAN MORCKHOVEN, who was born in 1910, first embarked on a career in teaching and then switched to journalism. In 1930 he founded an itinerant theatrical company that performed avant-garde plays. He is now the chairman of the «Vereniging van Vlaamse Toneelauteurs» (Association of Flemish Playwrights), and he is the theatre critic for the newspaper «De Standaard» and for various Belgian and Dutch periodicals.

His best known works include the following :
«*Amor spant zijn boog*» (Love tenses its bow) a comedy.

«*Draaimolen*» (Carrousel), a one-act play.

«*Karel van Denemarken*» (Charles of Denmark), an historic drama.

«*Het Buitenkansje*» (The windfall), a comedy.

«*Bartholomeusnacht*» (St. Bartholomew's night), a one-act play.

In addition, Paul Van Morckhoven is an excellent translator. He has translated works by Berthold Brecht, including «*Mutter Courage*» (Mother Courage), by Wittering, «*Zwei Links, Zwei Rechts*» (Two left, two right) and by Bloch, «*De Handen van Eurydice*» (The hands of Eurydice).

«*Het Amerikaans Toneel*» (The American theatre) and «*De Essentie van de Dramatiek*» (The foundations of the drama) are his most significant essays.

die zirche

wiener studentenbühne
wien I., ebendorferstraße 8, tel. 4293 00
12-15. 20-29 april 1967, 20 uhr

österreichische
erstaufführung

jozef van hoek

einstweilige
verfügung





BURGTHEATER IM AKADEMIETHEATER

Donnerstag, den 5. Dezember 1963

Bei aufgehobenem Abonnement - Preise III

Zum ersten Male:

SCHNEE

Ein Stück von Paul Willems

in vier Akten

Deutsch von Moria Sommer

Regie : Rudolf Steinboeck

Bühnenbilder : Lois Egg

Kostüme : Erni Kniepert

Musik : Paul Angerer

Anfang 20 Uhr

Ende nach 22.45 Uhr

The French-language theatre

BRIEF INTRODUCTION...

Since the contention that Brussels is merely the suburb of Paris, plays do appear from time to time which are devised and written by a Belgian.

It was the opening paragraph of a survey of the Belgian theatre by Romain Sanvic, which appeared in the Paris «Revue Théâtrale» in 1947. Though brief, it is a highly revealing passage, for it reflects both a sense of fierce pride and an inferiority complex. Brussels, an suburb of Paris? Brussels, a provincial city compared to the capital city of France? Sanvic admits this yet denies it too. It is this contradiction which expresses in a nutshell the problem of Belgium's French-language theatre.

IS BRUSSELS PROVINCIAL COMPARED TO PARIS ?

Factly enough, the emergence of the Belgian theatre in French only dates back to 1940.

Until then, Belgium had from a drama point of view been regarded as one of the French provinces. Most of the leading parts in plays performed in Brussels and Liege were filled by actors from France. To make a name for themselves, Belgian actors had to go and work in Paris. Belgium could pride herself on

providing the Paris stage with highly gifted artists, who used to come back to Belgium on tour once they made their name; but this system meant also that they were lost for Belgium. Some of the names which come to mind in this way are those of Berthe Bovy, Fernand Ledoux, Victor Francen, Madeleine Ozeray, Raymond Rouleau, Lucienne Lemarchand, Jean Servais, etc...

The same applied to playwrights. The Belgian Wiener became the typically Parisian Francis de Croisset who had such a successful career in comedy. Others such as Maurice Maeterlinck, or Fernand Crommelynck, only became successful when they had been acclaimed in Paris.

Attempts had been made between the wars to create a Belgian school. These attempts were undertaken by brave individualists and, at the time, they appeared to have ended in failure. Yet it was this which lay at the root of the present development of the Belgian theatre.

Foremost among these pioneers was Jules Delacre.

THE «THEATRE DU MARAIS»

He was a young poet, born in Vilvorde in 1883, whose volumes — «L'Offertoire» (The offering), «Roses blanches» (White roses) and «Le chant provincial» (Song of the provinces) — have lost none of their original subtlety. In his native city, Jules Delacre took charge of the local dramatic society, taking part both in the acting and production. He spent the war years in London. As he was turned down by the army for health reasons, he set up a small theatrical company that had the honour of performing «*L'anglais tel qu'on le parle*» (English as it is spoken), by Tristan Bernard, before King George V.

Upon his return to Belgium he had but one thought: to form a theatrical company at home as he had done in exile. On 22 February 1922, the brand new «Theatre du Marais» was opened to the public. The programme contained a manifesto, the following extract of which has lost none of its topicality:

«Works — that will be our motto. We do not blush over such an elementary act of faith, since our very conscience is involved and since the unhappy state of the Theatre today compels us to start at the beginning».

In spite of its triumphal tours abroad, the «Théâtre du Marais» had to close after five years (in 1926).

In 1930 it was reopened by two of Delacre's pupils, Aimé Declercq and Raymond Rouleau. This time it was the theatre's success which deprived Belgium of a promising company. In

1932 Rouleau staged «*Le Mal de la jeunesse*» (The pangs of youth), by the German playwright Brückner and took the play to Paris where it was vastly successful. Rouleau's company — including Jean Servais, Te Balachova, Lucienne Bogaert, Madeleine Ozeray and Lucienne Lemarchand — stayed on in Paris.

Once again, it was the appeal of Paris that proved the Belgian theatre's loss. As to Jules Delacre, he went on working in Brussels, outstanding teacher, he went on training my promising young actors. Until his death in 1954, he was a valued adviser to the budget of the National Theatre.

THE «RATAILLON» AND THE «VAUDEVILLE»

It would be unfair to claim that, during the historic days between the wars, Jules Deburau was completely alone in his efforts on behalf of the theatre.

There were other companies — most of them short-lived — with similar aims, including Albert Lepage's «Rataillon».

The «Rataillon», the first pocket theatre in Belgium, was formed in 1930. Its first headquarters were in the back-room of a cafe in the popular Molenbeek district, but it moved several times. Its creator, director and principal actor was, in addition, a poet and playwright. Hence the new company made its debut with a play by Albert Lepage — *Antigone* — followed at greater or lesser intervals by other plays from the same author. But the «Rataillon» also staged plays by other Belgian writers: Max Deauville, Roger Avermaete, Ghelderode, Maurice Tumerelle, Charles Plisnier, Edmond Kinds, etc... One of this enterprising company's greatest successes was its production of «*King Ubu*» in 1938.

The Rataillon still went on performing for a few years after the war, and more will be said about Albert Lepage in his capacity as a playwright.

A number of other attempts were made to renew the theatre, even by managements which had always concentrated on plays from Paris: e.g. the «Théâtre du Parc», which presented several plays by Ghelderode.

Nor should we omit to mention the efforts of a theatre that specialized in the lightest type of comedy, the Vaudeville Theatre, where outstandingly good actors such as Darman, Gustave Libeau and Marcel Roels used to perform. The Revue which it presented year by year was a typically Belgian but highly amusing and often quite subtle production.

This too was the time when Fernand Piette began his «Théâtre de l'Équipe» which is still touring the country with first-rate shows intended for working class audiences.

Thus between the wars there flew the swallows which heralded the spring of the Belgian theatre. Unexpected circumstances then helped this spring to blossom forth.



Performances of «Barabbas» by Michel de Ghelderode, at the Rataillon The-

THE BELGIAN THEATRE DURING THE OCCUPATION

On May 1940, the nazi troops invaded Belgium and the country was to remain occupied for four years and a half.

During those years, the German authorities tried to destroy all French influence in the Belgian territories, the German actors, and the Belgian theatre was thrown back on its own resources. At the same time it achieved new heights of popularity. Entertainment was scarce, travel was difficult, and people did not feel drawn to cinemas which were showing mostly German films. There remained the theatre, and audiences flocked to it. Faced with this golden opportunity, actors, directors and producers rose to the challenge.

German companies were formed and moved into the traditional theatres: the «Parc», «Galleries» and «Molière» theatres. In September 1940 the «Parc» reopened with Shakespeare's «Hamlet» (Shakespeare was the only English playwright whose works were authorized): the hall was so full that it overflowed but when the gravedigger remarked that men in England are mad there were loud protests from the audience and in the subsequent performances this line had to be cut out. Every type of play was performed, but especially the classics — Shakespeare, Corneille, Marivaux, Racine, Beaumarchais, Musset. They brought success to an actor, Marcel Boels, who had until then been confined to the theatre.

Belgian writers too benefited from the theatre's new-found popularity. One by one, the Galleries Theatre showed most of Cormelynck's plays, while the Parc performed those of Ghelderode. New talent began to emerge. Raymond G  r  me embarked on his career as actor, director and playwright. The public flocked to applaud a young actress, Marthe Dugard, who performed under the direction of Adrien Meyer. The company of Marcel Jozs staged an outstanding production of «*Tripes d'Or*» (Golden entrails).

A new company was formed at this time which was destined to grow and flourish. In 1943, in the Chamber Music hall of the «Palais des Beaux Arts», the «Rideau de Bruxelles» gave its first performance and enjoyed a tremendous success. The play was «*The Matron of Ephesus*», the first work of a promising young writer, Georges Sion. Somewhat later, the «Rideau» gave another talented novice his opportunity, it performed «*Tristan*» by Jos  -Andr   Lacour. Then there was a young amateur company that had grown from the Boy Scout movement, known as the «Com  diens Routiers Belges» (Belgian Travelling Company). Constantly on the move, performing in small Walloon villages as well as in the cities, their greatest success was «*Le Jeu des Quatre Fils Aymon*» (The tale of the four Aymon brothers) which Herman Cloosson had written specially for them and which was first shown at Faux-les-Tombes in August 1941. Based on the legend which relates the struggle of four brothers from the Ardennes against the powerful Emperor Charlemagne, this impassioned tale of heroic deeds proved highly topical and the performances soon turned into public resistance demonstrations.

The German authorities banned the play, but it continued to be performed under another title, «*Le Cheval Bayard*» (Steed Bayard), ostensibly by an unknown writer.

In 1944 the «Comédiens Routiers» also gave the first performance of a play that had been written by one of the members : it was «*Compagnons*» (Companions) by Maurice Huisman.

A NEW POLICY FOR THE THEATRE

First the liberation, then peace.

The position of the Belgian theatre was extremely promising, yet fraught with danger too. On the one hand it had gained a following. But on the other hand, the return to normal — renewed opportunities for travel, a plethora of foreign, particularly American films, and the return of French actors — might have caused it to lose this following.

In addition, there was too much centralization. Except for Brussels, Liege was the only French language city with a permanent company, the «Théâtre du Gymnase». Other theatres were used for opera or musical comedy, and straight plays were performed only by the visiting French companies which were beginning to reappear in Belgium. Herein too lay a danger.

Having proved its vitality, the Belgian theatre needed help so as not to lose the ground it had conquered, to get through a difficult period and to make further progress. This help was provided by the State, which introduced a policy of theatrical subsidies.

The first step was to create a National Theatre, or rather two : one in Dutch, in Antwerp, and one in French, with headquarters in Brussels. We shall only mention the latter.

The subsidies allocated for this National Theatre were in accordance with the heavy costs which it entailed. But financial help was also given to the other theatres, providing their productions were of a clearly cultural level.

THE NATIONAL THEATRE

begin with the National Theatre.

When this was first established, the management was entrusted to two brothers, Jacques and Maurice Huisman, who had formerly run the «Comédiens Routiers Belges». (1) This decision aroused heated debate, because such an important task had been entrusted to amateurs without basic professional training.

But the National Theatre soon attained professional standards, for it recruited members from all parts of the theatre world, and the polemics soon died down.

From its origins however, the National Theatre exhibited a desire to change the tone of Belgian theatrical life. Its promoters' aims were to broaden the spectrum of its audiences, to attract those who were not in the habit of visiting the theatre. It decided to search these audiences out.

From the start, therefore, the National Theatre functioned as a travelling company. During most of its existence (twenty-four years or so) it has consisted of three troupes which alternate as follows: while one performs in Brussels, the second is touring the main provincial cities, while the third is playing in small towns and villages. More than a hundred different places in Belgium have thus been visited, either on a regular or an occasional basis.

For the benefit of the lower income groups, season tickets were extremely low priced. They were offered for sale either through local

representatives or through the welfare departments of large firms and government offices. It may fairly be claimed that the work of the National Theatre has borne fruit. New audiences have been built up and, their taste for the theatre having been whetted, they have also begun to attend performances by other companies. As a result, season tickets at reduced prices were introduced by other theatres too. Soon the Belgian provinces began to enjoy ample theatrical coverage for, like the National Theatre, other theatres from Brussels and Liege were soon in the habit of presenting their productions away from home.

One drawback resulting from this campaign to recruit untutored audiences was reflected, during the National Theatre's first years, in its choice of plays. Being untutored, this new range of spectators would not have accepted novelties or experiments. Works by avant-garde writers from abroad or by young Belgian playwrights might have deterred them. Hence the fairly unadventurous nature of the repertoire (if Shakespeare, Shaw, Giraudoux or Claudel may be regarded as «unadventurous»). In this particular field, other companies were destined to play an important role.

(1) After a few years, Jacques Huisman remained as the sole director of the National Theatre. Maurice Huisman has now become the director of the National Opera.



A scene from «Hamlet»,
as performed by the
Belgian National Theatre.

«RIDEAU DE BRUXELLES» AND OTHER COMPANIES...

«Rideau de Bruxelles» was the first company to undertake this pioneering work. As already mentioned, its first performance had consisted of a young writer's first play: «*The Walls of Ephesus*» by Georges Sion. It has gone on fulfilling this early promise. The best playwrights to have emerged in post-war Belgium, have had their work performed first by this company. Moreover, its director, Claude Lemaire, has spared no effort to encourage promising talent. After reading a novel by Louis Willems, «*Tout est réel ici*» (All is real here) he decided to commission a play from the author, who had never before written for the stage. The result was «*Le bon Vin de M. Nuche*» (The good wine of Mr. Nuche). Even more unusual, he later commissioned Willems and the composer Ralph Darbo to write:

«A play suitable for a comedy company, in which the music and the songs are not only a pretext for the show, but an important extension of the dialogue, and that they should be well linked to the action. In addition, the show should be pleasing to the eye, and the music should be such a kind as to cling to the spectator's memory. And that all those working on the show should enjoy themselves».

The result was «*Le Marché des petites heures*» (Market at dawn).

The «Rideau de Bruxelles» did not confine its efforts to prospecting the rising Belgian generation; it also gave the Belgian public perfor-

mances of plays by foreign writers whose work had never before been given in French — Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Christopher Fry, etc...

This work of prospecting the new playwrights was soon shared by another company. The «Théâtre de Poche» (Pocket Theatre), formed in 1951 by Roger Domani, has specialized in the avant-garde. The experiments which it has undertaken, and which are often bold in the extreme, have on occasion proved so successful as to swell to amazing proportions its usually restricted audience of students and intellectuals. Most surprising of all perhaps it has been doing this deserving but hazardous work for over fifteen years.

In the years immediately after the war, the regular theatres such as the «Galleries», the «Parc», the «Théâtre Molière» in Brussels and the «Théâtre du Gymnase» in Liege, had all taken a far more conventional line. They devoted their talents to plays that had proved successful in Paris. But gradually they made more and more exceptions to this rule, and here too bolder ventures were undertaken from time to time.

Lastly, the «Gymnase» Theatre in Liege has in the past few years given a chance to many young Belgian writers, whose works have been included in the season's programme and carefully staged.

TRENDS IN PUBLIC TASTE

Where does the Belgian theatre stand today?

In the first place, the difference between the various theatres is no longer as it was. Although the National Theatre is still doing pioneering work, chiefly in the matter of provincial tours, other companies too have adopted the prospecting methods which it originated.

A similar phenomenon may be discerned in the matter of repertoire.

This is doubtless due to the constant advance in public taste. In 1958, when the «Théâtre des Galeries» broke with tradition and staged «*Man for Man*», the second of Berthold Brecht's works to be shown in Belgium, the spectators clearly did not comprehend it. When the National Theatre staged works such as «*The Skin of our Teeth*» by Thornton Wilder (1950), «*The Cocktail Party*» by T.S. Eliot (1952) or «*The good soul of Se-Chuan*», also by Brecht (1957), many in the audience were quite obviously discontented.

Since then, times have changed, and one may perhaps ask why. In the first place, theatre-going has increased. But another important factor, perhaps even a crucial factor, is the influence of television. This «window on to the world» is broadening the intellectual horizon of vast masses of people, is rendering them better informed and more receptive. This is appreciated particularly by the actors, many of whose subtle effects used to be lost on the

public and who now meet with a quick penetrating reaction on the spectators' part. As a result, the «avant-garde» concept is dually becoming meaningless.

The unadventurous character of the plays seen in the early years by companies such as the Theatre National, has become a thing of the past. Nowadays they can stage Brecht, We Dürrenmatt, Schehadé, Mrozek, and successfully attract large audiences. Theatres such as the «Galeries», «Parc», «Molière», «Gym» which used formerly to show only light can now undertake ventures which at one time would have seemed bold in the extreme. Thus both as regards plays and audiences the differences between Belgian theatres are far less noticeable. Obviously, neither the National Theatre nor the «Rideau» would «*Les Filles*» (The girls) by René Marsan was such a triumph at the «Galeries» there in 1967. But, in addition to this light entertainment, the «Galeries» during the same season also presented «*Les Séquestrés d'Altona*» (prisoners of Altona) by Sartre and «*Le dur*» (Crusis) by Claudel.

At present the theatre in Belgium is on a new plane. On the whole, it is doing well. Companies have sprung up in recent years. «L'Alliance», the «Théâtre de Quatre Villes», Claude Volter's company and «L'Œuvre» in Brussels, «L'Etuve» in Liège. But

(1) It is worth mentioning the Théâtre du «Barabbas» and «Le rouge» (Red magic) by de Ghelderode in 1968 and 1969.

into a framework that is already firmly established. Perhaps we are on the threshold of another revolution, but it is difficult to foresee where it will come from...

There is still room for improvement. Audiences have become larger, but they are confined to the upper and petty bourgeoisie, office workers, students and intellectuals. The working class still knows little or nothing about the theatre: the sole exceptions being a few attempts made by the National Theatre — theatrical weeks at La Louvière, Namur and Huy in 1968 and 1969, and the annual Spa Festival — together with the penetration in depth undertaken during the past twenty years by that brave roving company, Fernand Piette's «Théâtre de l'Equipe».

THE ACTOR'S STATUS

As we have seen, the Belgian theatre is not doing badly, but what about the actors?

In the past twenty years, they too have acquired a new dignity. Gone are the days when Paris was their only hope, when a career in Belgium meant a lifetime in obscurity. Some of course do still go to seek their fortune on the banks of the Seine. In this way Belgium has lost to the French theatre actors such as Raymond Gérôme, Jean-Jacques, Pierre Michaël, Françoise Giret, etc., and directors such as the late Stéphane Ariel or Pierre Debauche. But these cases have by now become the exception rather than the rule.

In the first place, an actor now finds better training facilities in Belgium. In addition to the Academies of Dramatic Art, special colleges have been established for the benefit of young actors and directors: the «Institut National Supérieur des Arts du Spectacle» (INSAS - Higher National Institute for the Performing arts) and the «Institut des Arts de Diffusion» (IAD - Institute for the Disseminating arts). True, an actor's first steps are not always easy, but this is the case in other professions too.

In Belgium nowadays a capable actor can work and earn a good living. But in this case «work» is the operative word, for to make a living he has to function almost non-stop. There are far more theatres than before, and there are worth-while openings too in radio, television

and film dubbing. Earnings however are relatively low and, to make ends meet, actors must be prepared to rush from job to job, from the television studio or film laboratory to a rehearsal or actual performance of his play ; in addition he may be teaching in a special school or he may be giving private tuition. An exhausting timetable of this kind is obviously not ideal.

In Brussels, plays are usually performed for three weeks or a month. Thanks to its tours out of town, the National Theatre may keep the same play on for two even three months. However, the «Gymnase» in Liege puts on a different play every week. Two months is little enough, but to prepare a show in only a week (and often very successfully too) is a remarkable feat. Matters can only be improved by finding more theatre-goers — but how ?

Much remains to be done to regulate the pace of work and also to provide actors with greater security. Much has already been done to improve their status. Belgian actors are increasingly aware of the fact that they occupy an important place in society. Occasionally they may even be regarded as their country's representatives. Every year, Belgian companies undertake tours abroad : the National Theatre travels to South America or the Lebanon, the «Rideau» to Spain or the U.S.S.R., while the «Parc» may perform in Poland. Both the National Theatre and the «Rideau» performed most successfully at the Montreal World's Fair.

Lastly, it should be noted that the Brussels theatre critics award an annual prize to the best actor and actress, and that there is a special prize every third year for the best direc-

tor. The handing over of these «Eves du Theatre» (Theatrical Eves) has become something of a ceremonial occasion.

As we have seen, all is not yet perfect on the Thespian scene in Belgium, but extraordinary progress has been achieved in little more than twenty years.

THE PREFERENCE SYSTEM

As already explained, there is less and less in the image of Brussels as an outpost of France. Except on one point and this is one that needs explanation.

The matter was put very concisely by Georges in an article which he wrote for the May 1960 issue of the quarterly «Théâtre du monde» :

«As members of the French-speaking community we suffer from a form of centralization that would not in fact affect us. Owing to a perfectly legal system of preference covering «the French language countries», most of the new plays staged in Paris are not available to us much later. This means that we cannot show them in our theatres while they are still new. We have to wait until their success in Paris has been exhausted, and often also until a touring French company has used the preference while performing in Belgium cities. We know that *Port Royal* or *L'Hurluberlu* (The Scatter-brain) are being performed in Berlin, Göttingen or Helsinki at a time when Belgian theatres, because they are French-speaking, have to forgo the opportunity. We can see these very same plays, in Brussels or Antwerp, in Dutch-language theatres, because these are translated versions ! Three or four years later, at the very last among all those who want to produce living plays, we are finally allowed to think of «reviving» them...»

These barriers which hinder the Belgian theatre cover not only original French plays. They also

cover many foreign plays which are first performed, or which it is proposed to premiere in French, on the banks of the Seine, even if they are relatively old plays.

There is no need to stress how deplorable a position this is. We shall see however that, besides these major drawbacks, the system does provide one minor advantage...

PARIS, AN OUTPOST OF BRUSSELS ?

It has almost become a truism to say that Belgium is a crossroads, that it is a country where several cultures meet.

In addition to the Dutch culture, with which they are in constant touch through the intermediary of their Flemish countrymen, French-speaking Belgians are influenced not only by the French culture, but also by the English (and hence also the American) and Germanic cultures.

We understand our northern neighbours better than the French can. We feel more concerned than they do by what is happening in Great Britain, the U.S.A., Germany, Central and Eastern Europe.

In the theatre, this inquiring bent of mind is conducive to direct advantages. In the matter of foreign plays, Belgian theatres have to keep ahead of Paris, and stage the latest productions from London, New York, Munich or Bratislava before the French. Otherwise it is too

late, and the preference system comes into operation. This system therefore does have an advantage in that it compels Belgian producers to be on the alert and to move boldly.

Belgians are better than the French at understanding foreign mentalities. Whereas a Paris adaptation will «Frenchify» an English or German text, turning it into a «Paris product», a Belgian adaptation will remain truer to the original. When it is translated into French by a Belgian, an English play will remain English, a German play German. In this respect, Brussels is ahead of Paris. It was Brussels that gave the first performances in French of works by Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Christopher Fry, James Saunders, Arnold Wesker, Robert Bolt, Max Frisch, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Robert Shaw, Dario Fo, etc...

This is perhaps the most eloquent proof of the vitality of the Belgian theatre. Some French journalists have realized this, and they now travel to Brussels, to Liege, or to the National Theatre's annual festival at Spa, to cover French-language premieres. A wag might be tempted to say that, from time to time, Paris belongs to provincial Belgium.

* * *

In these few lines, we have drawn a doubtless very incomplete picture of the French language theatre in Belgium. But it should be remembered that it is the author who is the vital factor in the theatre. Let us therefore take a look at this crucial element in the active and enterprising Belgian theatrical world : the Belgian playwright.

THE WRITERS

Presentation

Is there such a thing as a Belgian French language playwright ? Is it not more likely he is a French playwright who, by mere chance was born and is still living in Belgium ?

To ask this question, is to query the very existence of Belgian national existence. Belgium is merely an administrative community ; on the many efforts that have been made to make it survive as a nation, as a community sharing similar customs, ideas and ambitions, Willy nilly, the four to five million French speaking Belgians live alongside their Flemish countrymen, and vice versa. This shared marriage that has endured for centuries, despite the difference in languages, has, despite the difference in languages, created a common awareness : Flemings, Walloons and Bruxellois (for there are three parts to this marriage !) share the same virtues, the same customs and the same cultural traditions. It is a fact that every Flemish writer has assimilated something of the French culture, that every Belgian author writing in French has even pure Walloons like Georges Simenon and Marcel Thiry — have assimilated something of Flemish.

Every Belgian writer is a divided man. Within him something of the Bruegel and something of the Admirable Ruggero

physical anxiety and mysticism on the one hand, intense sensuality on the other hand. The flame of Jerome Bosch, the blue of Roger de la Pasture; joy unbridled, such as Rik Maerckx depicted in his statuary.

Sometimes the two elements are combined: pushed to its zenith sensuality becomes another aspect of the basic anguish, while the errors and torments of the quest for the absolute are garbed in the accessories of the kingdom of the senses — flesh, draped cloth, colour, light and masks. The Belgian theatre is not light or frivolous in character: it is a theatre of struggle.

THE LANGUAGE PROBLEM

There is a language problem too.

«Every Belgian writer — says Paul Willems — thinks nostalgically of the nations with great cultures, where language springs from the people. Fortunate France, where Malherbe could say that «The porters of Port-au-Foin are our language masters». In Belgium, our masters would be the tram-drivers».

Alluding to the contemporary playwright, Paul Willems adds:

«For each of his works he has to invent a time, a place and a language. Contemporary plays a place and a language. Contemporary plays to cull their material from reality and submit it to their own laws. This is where the Belgian playwright faces an additional problem.

The language in his play cannot be based on Belgian life. In order to ring true, it must be transposed. The problem affects every smallest detail down to the names of the characters. If a Frenchman calls one of his characters Monsieur Dupont, this indicates his place in society and the type of language he speaks. The same goes for Mr. Smith in England or for Herr Müller in Germany. We in Belgium have only M. Beulemans».

The Belgian theatre is not, and cannot be realistic. Realism here has to be confined to plays written in dialect, either as part of the Brussels or Walloon theatre (1).

(1) One important contribution to dialect writing was «Le Mariage de Mademoiselle Beulemans» (The Wedding of Miss Beulemans), by Fonson and Wicheler, a play whose continued appeal was confirmed by its recent successful revival by the «Compagnie des Galeries» (Galeries Company).

Belgian plays therefore are set either in a more or less imaginary historic setting (there are many historic plays, with fine costumes as an added attraction), or abroad, or nowhere, in a drawing room, in an inn, a forest... The setting is never Brussels, Wallonia or the banks of the Scheldt, but an Ardennes forest or the banks of a river that has sprung from the poet's mind. In a kingdom which is not quite Flemish nor Walloon, the kingdom of Kings Crommelynck and Ghelderode. And this brings us back to our narrative.

We have to select a starting point, say 1945. Sadly this means that we sacrifice Maeterlinck and Crommelynck, neither of whom had any new play performed after that date. But it does include Ghelderode, who flourished as a writer in both the post-war periods. Let us start with him.

MICHEL DE GHELDERODE

De Ghelderode's biography is a brief one. Adolphe-Achémard-Louis-Michel Martens was born at Ixelles, on 3 April 1898. The man who has been written under the name Michel de Ghelderode died at his home, in the rue Lefranc in Schaerbeek, which was filled with masks, models and puppets, on 1 April 1963. Between these dates he had, in order to make a living, been employed as an archivist by the municipality of Schaerbeek; and, to offset the suffering inflicted on him by his precarious health, he had written short stories, essays and some plays.

He had his first play performed in 1918: it was a «poetic» one-act play called «*La Mort regardée à la fenêtre*» (Death looks in at the window). In 1925, he met Johan de Meester, who was the leader and director of the «Vlaamse Volkstoneel».

It was this theatre which premiered (in Dutch translation) the first great works by this Flemish French-language writer: «*La Farce mort qui taillit trépasser*» (The farce of the dead man who almost died - 1925); «*Ime, de la vie de saint François*» (Scenes from the life of Saint Francis - 1927) which caused a furore in some of the places in which it was performed; «*Barabbas*» (1929) and «*Péguy*» (1930). His plays were performed in French too: at the «Parc» theatre, at the «L'Atillon» and elsewhere. Mostly to a little audience, and to the delight of his friends: Roland Crommelynck, Max Deauville, James Fournier, Camille Poupeye, Franz Hellens...



«Mademoiselle Jaïre»
by Michel de Ghelderode.

Success came suddenly, on 13 June 1947. At the «Théâtre de l'Œuvre» in Paris, the company headed by Catherine Toth and André Reybaz presented two plays by this hitherto unknown author : «*Hop Signor !*» and «*Le Ménage de Caroline*» (Caroline's household).

They were hailed as a revelation ! Ghelderode had been discovered and soon his plays were being produced everywhere, in France, in Belgium, all over the world ; his complete works were published. The picture would not have been complete without a whiff of scandal — there were shouts and actual fighting during the premiere of «*Fastes d'enfer*» (The pageantry of hell), at the Marigny Theatre on 20 October 1949.

A strange destiny indeed, the destiny of an outstanding writer.

A FLEMISH WRITER

De Ghelderode is a Belgian, first and foremost. A writer of this kind is only conceivable in Belgium. He writes in French, although he is fundamentally Flemish. He himself has remarked that :

«This is one of the peculiarities of my live country, which has such an aptitude for the physical pleasures, and which is capable of frenetic rejoicing at every opportunity. The Flemish nation, in which I am rooted, has a dual character : superbly vital and materialistic, it likes at the same time to indulge in metaphysical anxiety and to cultivate a taste for the macabre, a taste which it shares with the great people like the Spaniards, who have a similar inclination to mingle death with everyday life, but in a manner more absolute».

An aptitude for the physical pleasures. Thus Ghelderode's art is not rooted in the brain but aims to awaken the senses. First and foremost the sense of sight : shapes, colours and light which stand out even more as they are displayed against a backdrop of darkness ; the influence of Flemish and Spanish painters — Brueghel, El Greco, Jerome Bosch and Velasquez ; an emphasis on the human form, not so much the form itself but everything that simulates the human form or grimaces : statues, masks, puppets, android objects, those that are alleged to work spells or magic.

Nor does he neglect the sense of hearing, smell, touch or taste. The flesh is everywhere — in the form of gluttony, guzzling and lusciousness.

The nostrils quiver in response to aromas that prove even more attractive as they are soon tested by the sulphur vapours of Hell, by the effluence of Death.

THIRST IN DE GHELDERODE'S WORKS

Thirst of the senses and of Death, these are the two mainstays of de Ghelderode's works. As Jean Francis has written so aptly (1) :

«...if, in all his plays, one had to choose the most important moment, the most terrible, most dramatic and also most characteristic moment, one would doubtless select the hallucinating scene in «Barabbas», when thirst tortures the bandit and his two henchmen while in another corner, Jesus, prostrate, waits and prays. Thirst ! His sulphur-flavoured plays, his carnal, biting and convulsed writing, which scrapes the throat and burns the chest, is dominated entirely by Thirst. One might even say longing, in so far as Thirst is a need rather than a privation. A longing for wine in «Barabbas» ; for gold in «Magie Rouge» (Red magic) ; for justice in «Pantagleize» ; for women and the liberating orgasm in «La Farce des Ténébreux» (The farce of the hypocrites) ; for personality

in «Don Juan» ; for escape in «Christophe Colomb» (Christopher Columbus) ; for objective conscience in «La Mort du Docteur Faust» (The Death of Doctor Faustus) ; a longing to guzzle, to enjoy life, to drink, to forget Heaven and Hell. Lust, Gluttony, Fury, Avarice, the seven deadly sins lead the dance of the mask unleashed by Jerome Bosch from Brabant».

This thirst, in de Ghelderode's view, is an integral part of the human condition. It is a constant torture, a hopeless torment. The artist's duty is to describe it, to depict its every grimace and contortion. In «L'Ecole des Buffons» (School for buffoons) the master-jester Chevalier Folial tells his pupils :

— In truth I tell you... The secret of our art, of great art, of every art that wants to last ? The answer is CRU-EL-TY !

Inevitably, this thirst leads to Death.

(1) Jean Francis : «Michel de Ghelderode, dramaturge des pays de par-deça», (1949).

THE PRESENCE OF DEATH

Whatever form it may take, lust, gluttony, avarice, this thirst may well represent the thirst for death. In «*Hop Signor !*» we can watch this monstrous alliance as it materialises. Marguerite Harstein is the maiden wife of the deformed old sculptor Jureal, who is nicknamed «hell's showman». Desire lurks all around her, the desire of the monk Don Pilar, the desire of two young noblemen who kill each other for her. But this lecherous virgin girl is keeping herself for another lover. Her thirst is not quenched until she receives death from the hands of the executioner Larose. The stake becomes her bridal couch. It is the same frenzy that urges Purnelende d'Ostrelande, a wild young noblewoman, toward Halewyn, the Flemish werewolf, the killer of virgins who, having possessed them, hangs them naked, leaving them to turn blue and to rot in the wind. But at the last moment, the girl's noble blood speaks up. She kills the evil lover before the act, and she can be seen galloping back to her father's castle, bearing Halewyn's head aloft. But before she hands this dreadful trophy to the old Duke of Ostrelande, she kisses the dead lips and she in turn dies of this kiss.

In the World of Ghelderode, death is omnipresent : shapes risen from the sepulchre, like «*Mademoiselle Jaire*» or men convulsed on the edge of death, like bishop Eremo in «*Fastes d'enfer*». In this latter play, the chorus of archdeacons with gargoyles' heads shouts, with sombre delectation :

— The dead stink... the living too !

A CONTEMPORARY WRITER

De Ghelderode emerged at the right time. Working completely alone for thirty years, he invented everything that has since become the substance of the modern theatre. His theatre is the «*theatre of cruelty*» foreshadowed another great precursor, Antonin Artaud.

With his clowns, sneering jesters, and dazed fools, his work represents the theatre of derision, the theatre of the absurd. *Barabbas* who wants to engulf the world in an ocean of blood and fire in order to avenge the death of the Just, is stabbed obscurely by a fairground buffoon. *Pantegleize*, the bewildered poet, sets off a revolution with his innocent remark «*What a lovely day !*» and is shot to death without understanding his fate.

Something should be said too about de Ghelderode's language. It is a language that has been wrought afresh, rich in archaisms, neologisms, words borrowed from the Flemish, novel echoes and flying images. It contains bursts of verbal delirium that are reminiscent of Auden, Beckett or Ionesco.

Something should be said too about the extraordinary performance of «*Le Jeu de Marie Misérable*» (The pageant of poor Mary), which had been commissioned by the municipal authorities of Woluwe-Saint-Lambert and which was first shown there, in 1952, on the square front of the church. With its cavalcades, epic surges of bewildered people, its parade of giants, it was a resurrection of the great mystery plays of old.

... more should be said about his work, «*Escorial*», about «*Le Ménage de Carole*», about «*Masques ostendais*» (Masks from Ostend), about «*La Ballade du Grand Macabre*», about «*Les Angles*» (The Ballad of the great Mangles) of the Blind)...

...olderode created his own universe. These notes can hope to give no more than a faint image of it. There are other Bel-landers waiting in the wings...

HERMAN CLOSSON

Herman Closson is three years younger than de Ghelderode. He was born in Brussels in 1901. He too succeeded in creating his own universe. Music was his first love. He began as a music critic and secretary of the International Music Society. But soon he switched his allegiance to the theatre, and began to write plays. He taught Theatrical History and the Technique of the Theatre. He also became a respected critic and the author of treatises such as «*De l'art dramatique*» (Of dramatic art); «*Le Théâtre, cet inconnu*» (The theatre as an unknown); «*Le Comédien*» (The actor). He then adapted many English and German plays: «*The Merchant of Venice*», a first French version of Arthur Miller's «*The Crucible*» (*La Chasse aux Sorcières*) which, for the accuracy of its rendering, is to be preferred to Marcel Aymé's «*Sorcières de Salem*» (The witches of Salem), etc.

Closson's first play dates from 1925, and was called «*Sous-sol*» (Basement). This was followed by «*Spectacle ou la Comédie du Public*» (Spectacle, or the public's comedy) which was dated 1928 and, in 1935, by «*Godetroid de Bouillon*», which was first performed by the «*Rideau gris*» of Marseille with a cast including two unknowns, Louis Ducreux and André Roussin.

With this latter play — which caused a furore in Belgium, because of its irreverent treatment of a national hero — the writer proved his sta-

ture. He had by then developed a style which Suzanne Lilar defines as follows : (1)

«His nervous, sobre language, fearfully effective in its speed and sword-like precision, occasionally becomes more human, revealing the chink in his armour, but soon resumes its usual taut and violent tempo».

Let us try to discern, play by play, what Closson's ethics are.

BECOMING LEGENDARY...

Shakespeare, the hero of «*William ou la Comédie de l'Aventure*» (William or the Comedy of adventure), written in 1938, exclaims :

— You must try to be human, to touch always on essentials, but what is it that is human in man ?

This question is one that most of Closson's characters ask themselves : what is it that is essential in themselves ? This quest for the truth about a human being, beyond surface appearances and everyday problems, could perhaps he said to owe a lot to Pirandello. Closson likes disguises, false impressions, all

the aspects of illusion, which causes every one to form their own particular image of people. In «*Sire Halawyn*» (1955) the first Halawyn to present himself to the audience is false Halawyn, and in «*Borgia*» (1945), it is false Borgia.

Step by step, however, he forges this Nietzschean reply : that which is human in man that which transcends him, the legend emanates from him.

«*La Passante illuminée*» (The illuminated ser-by - 1939) is about a young woman, Lucine, who is isolated on an island with three men. Each of them has his own idea at this woman he desires, for whom he thirsts and hungers. To each of them, she is the roine of a personal erotic dream, which he burning to fulfil. At last she makes her choice and selects the youngest of her three suitors, Philippe. Together they decide to flee to Europe. But as they are about to embark, Philippe leaves this woman to whom he had looked complete fulfilment. The dream has died: the light of reality. The young man leaves a woman who is too real and returns to his companions to find anew the ideal woman: their shared dream.

Having become legendary, the dream of the three lone men has at last become real.

(1) Suzanne Lilar : «*Soixante ans de théâtre belge*» (La Renaissance du Livre, 1952).

ETHICS OF RENUNCIATION

which is real in a Closson hero, is an idea of tragedy. This image is the more intense because it escapes from the debasing effect of the real. Listen to *Frédérique*, the virgin who was killed by Halwryn and killed him before their love was fulfilled :

That which I have not known is so wonderful !
Already the memory of it is growing, I wait the day when I shall be sure at last that it all happened... Halwryn and I, today we begin to live together.

In order to construct his legend, each one of Closson's characters moves from sacrifice to sacrifice, from renunciation to renunciation. Lucrèce Borgia renounces his only love, Lucrezia's destiny lies elsewhere : to be Caesar, the leader, the maker of the people. That tempted Godetroid in the Crusade, was a venture, feats of arms, the discovery of uncharted lands, and also the love of the handmaid, an amazon who accompanied him, Genevieve. He renounces all of this, just as in the last scene he can be seen to discard his arms and his coat of mail : «I go to the tomb of Christ». Genevieve, who wants to accompany him, says : «Forgive me... Let me make my end with me».

Genevieve de Gallemarde, the adventuress in *«Épreuve du feu»* (Trial by fire - 1944), poses ironically as Joan of Arc escaped from the stakes at Rouen. Her imposture proves successful, but a character is born within her who pre-

vents her enjoying her ridiculous achievement ; having posed continually as Joan of Arc, she becomes Joan of Arc ; she dies because she can no longer perform her role, because she ends up believing in it.

Let us recall also the last scene of *«Le Jeu des Quatre Fils Aymon»* (The play of the four brothers Aymon - 1941). The four knights from the Ardennes, whose adventures we have shared throughout the play, are replaced by four superhuman statues ; meanwhile two choristers chant the Ardennes verse-chronicle :

— Fiery land of Walloon blood — they are alive, your sons Aymon !

Sublimated in this way the four brothers are at last fully alive.

THE WRITER'S ROLE

One character of major importance in several of Closson's works is that of the writer, who might be described as a professional creator of legends.

What an awe-inspiring craft it is. If those who tackle it are proved wanting, they are the object of mockery and scorn.

Man of letters ; becomes an insult, both in *«Sire Halwryn»* and in a riotous farce based on the legend of Lady Godiva, *«La Farce des deux nues»* (Farce of the two nudes - 1943). The

comic monk who is the chronicler of the *Aymon Brothers* witnesses some stupendous feats ; but when he wants to relate them he resorts to clichés and pleonasm. Here it is the Ardennes people which is the true creator of legend, the woodmen, peasants and shepherds. Closson has also depicted a real man of letters : Shakespeare as he appears in «*William ou la Comédie de l'Aventure*» (William or the Comedy of Adventure). We watch him as he lives in a low Elizabethan tavern, the lair of whores, thieves and murderers. These are the raw materials with which this «writing machine» constructs his theatre. The entire play oscillates between two levels, or even three : real life, the theatre, and the theatre within the theatre, that fictitious existence which comes to life during rehearsals. Shakespeare's brain transforms those around him : the son of a goldsmith in York street becomes Hamlet, an old beggar is turned into King Lear. Every incident, down to the most vulgar or trivial, is transmuted into poetry. In the middle of a quarrel, a dangerous hoodigan shouts at Shakespeare : «Shut up !»

And Shakespeare marvels : «Shut up ! The splendour of the conventional retort !»

PAGEANTRY AND EROTICISM...

There are many facets to Closson. There Closson the great popular playwright, author not only of the *Aymon Brothers* but other pageants such as «*Le Jeu de Han*» (The Han pageant), which was performed in the world-famous grotto in 1948 ; or the pet melodrama «*Yolande de Beersel*» (at Beersel Castle in 1950), and an amusing satire of Wienerns, intended for adolescent audiences, called «*Le Spectre du Bison blanc*» (The spectre of the white bison - 1943).

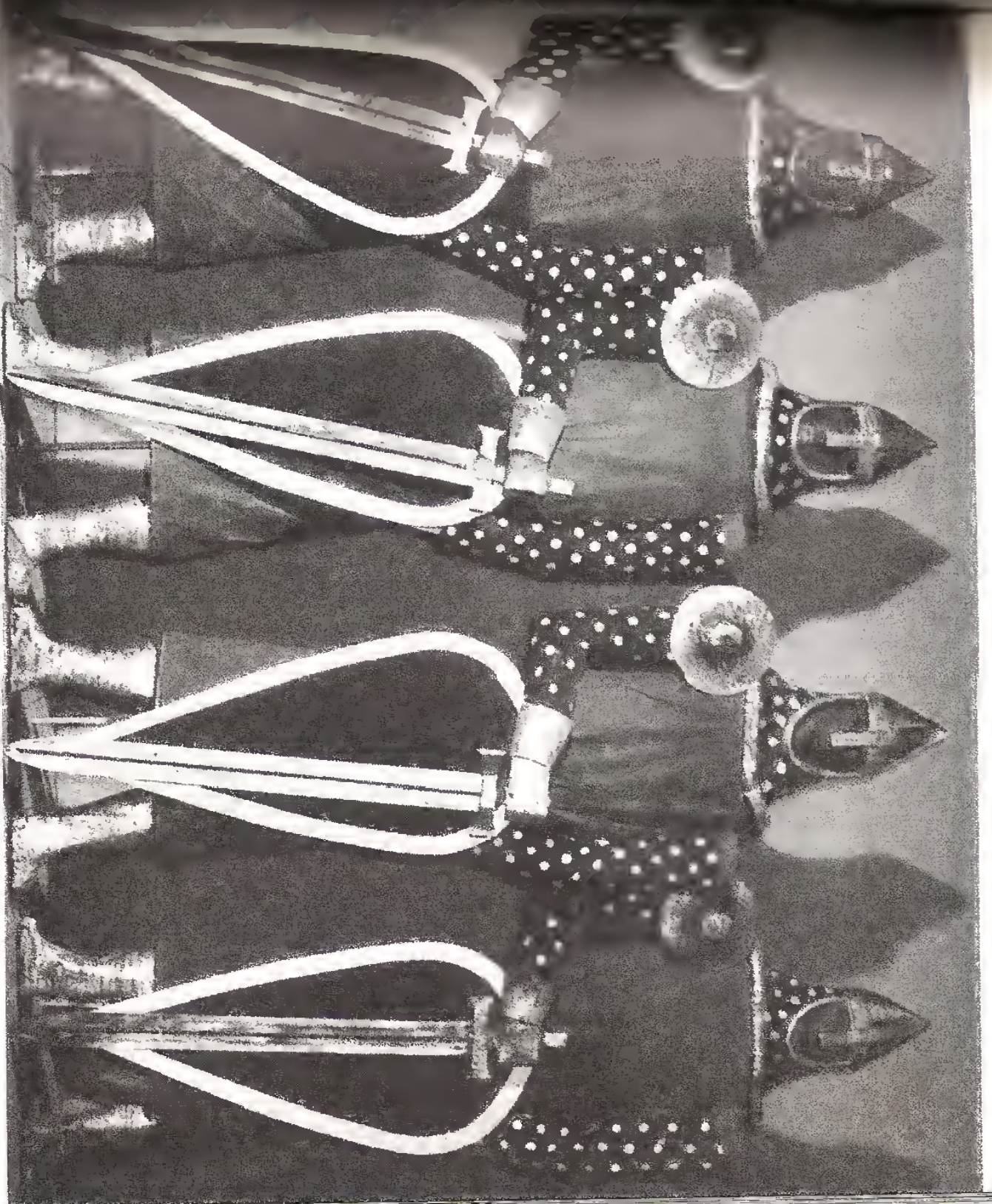
Closson's eroticism has at times given offence even though it is essentially cerebral in character. It is present in the author's last work «*Le Meublé*» (The furnished apartment), which has not as yet been performed. It is perhaps surprising that he has not given us his version of *Don Juan*, but in fact all of Closson's characters contain something of Don Juan.

Then there is Closson the creator of haughty inaccessible amazons, armed from top to toe. Yolande in the *Aymon Brothers*, Geneviève in *Godetroid*, and the invulnerable yet too vulnerable heroines of «*Sang de l'Amazonne*» (Blood of the Amazon - 1950).

Closson, in short, is a writer who is both highly individual and extremely demanding.

* * *

There are other playwrights who belong to the period between the wars and the post-war era. Most of them are novelists



«The Aymon Brothers» by Herman Closson.

have been tempted occasionally to write plays. They include : Pierre Nothomb, with a biblical drama «Izac», published in 1962 ; Roger Avermaete : «La Visite (The visit) and «Le miracle» (The miracle) in 1950, «La guerre de la Vache» (War for a cow) in 1964 and «Quand le Diable s'en mêle» (When the devil interferes) ; Alexis Curvers with «Ce vieil Oedipe» (Old Oedipus, 1947) ; O.P. Gilbert with «Mollenard», 1961 ; Marie-Thérèse Bodart with «Et Adam repoussé» (And Adam replied, 1947) and «Le monde éclatera demain» (The world explodes tomorrow, 1952) ; Charles Plisnier with «Hospitalité» (Hospitality, 1948) ; and Antoine Lepage with «Faust» and «Don Juan» in 1960 and «Jeanne, fille de France ?» (Joan, daughter of France ? in 1962).

* * *

THE SNOW WAS TAINTED

Now for Simenon.

This Belgian from Liege, born in 1903, published over two hundred novels. He is most widely read living writer. He has written only one play, in collaboration with a Frenchman, Frédéric Dard. But this play, «La neige était sale» (The snow was tainted), first performed at the «Théâtre de l'Œuvre» in Paris in 1950, is an important one.

The action is set in a country that is occupied by a foreign army. It is wintertime. People are hungry, cold and afraid. Many are arrested and shot. But the worst thing of all is the rot caused by poverty and the soldiers' presence. One of the characters says :

— It won't snow again tonight. The old snow is tainted. It's becoming repulsive.

The character who speaks this line is young Frank. He himself is a perfect symbol of the widespread dirt and corruption. His mother, an elderly prostitute, runs a brothel in which she might come to be entertained by girls reduced to this extremity through hunger. Frank leads the life of a parasite and a voyeur in an aggressively luxurious apartment. In order to impress his hoodligan friend Kromer, he kills a warrant-officer, quite gratuitously, for no particular reason. Then he kills an old woman in order to steal from her. He goes from bad to worse. In the same house, there lives a young Mr. Holst with his daughter Sissy.

Holst used to be a well-known art critic, now he is driving a tram. Frank seduces her. Then, through sheer desperation, in order to win a love of which he does not feel worthy, he wants to pass the girl on to his friend Kroger. Sissy flees, half-naked, into the snow. She is brought back and catches pneumonia, which finally kills her.

Only after this exploit Frank is arrested. Although he had not realized it, his black market operations had brought him into contact with members of the resistance. The interrogators want him to denounce them. He is imprisoned in a school that has been turned into a gaol, and from which hostages are taken every morning to be shot. From the classroom in which he is locked up, he can see a window on the distance, with clothes drying, a cot and a lamp, people who are living, as well as they can, who are still trying to live. He only wants to die.

In order to break down his resistance, the emaciated old official who is his interrogator allows him to see Mr. Holst and Sissy, whose health is at last on the mend. Sissy tells Frank :

— I came to tell you that I love you.

And Mr. Holst adds :

— Even when there is no war, the job of being a man is always difficult... It is always difficult, and not everyone succeeds.

When they are gone, Frank realizes what this meeting means for him : that he has been forgiven, that he is loved.

* * *

With Simenon, we have moved into the realm of Belgian playwrights who live abroad, those whose capital is no longer Brussels or Liege, but Paris. Yet how Belgian they remain, if only through their quest for the absolute !

Of this group, four more names should be mentioned : Claude Spaak, Denis Marion, José-André Lacour, Félicien Marceau.

CLAUDE SPAAK

Claude Spaak was born in Brussels in 1904.

His father was the playwright Paul Spaak (1870-1936) — the author of *«Kaatje»*, of *«Malgré ceux qui tombent»* (In spite of those who fall), of some excellent adaptations of Shakespeare, etc., and who was also the director of the Royal Monnaie Theatre. Paul Spaak's sons made outstanding careers in very different fields : Paul-Henri in politics, Charles as a writer for the screen (1) and Claude as a playwright, like his father.

Having worked first in the plastic arts department at the «Palais des Beaux Arts», he then moved to Paris, where his first play was performed. *«L'Auberge des apparences»* (The inn of pretences) was presented by Marcel Herrand at the «Comédie des Champs-Élysées» during the 1937 Exhibition (the performances were disturbed at 10 every night by the fireworks display). Since then, his plays have been performed constantly on the Paris and Brussels stage. The titles are as follows :

In productions by Marcel Herrand : *«L'Ecole de la médisance»* (School for scandal) after Sheridan (1940) and *«Primavera»* (1946). At the Belgian National Theatre : *«Rossignols de Castille»* (Nightingales from Castile) and *«La Rose des Vents»* (The wind rose) in 1953. At the «Vieux-Colombier» : *«L'Absent»* (The absent one) and *«L'Heure sonnera»* (The hour will strike) in 1950, *«Le Pain blanc»* (White bread) in 1957 and *«Soleil de Minuit»* (The midnight sun) in 1959. Lastly, at the «Athénée», in 1962 :

«Trois fois le jour ou Le Onzième Commandement» (Three times daily, or the eleventh commandment).

Radio and television in France, Belgium and other countries have also presented the following :

«Carmagnola» ; *«Le Pont des Soupirs»* (The bridge of sighs) ; *«Printemps en octobre»* (Spring in October) ; *«Le Temps des adieux»* (A time for farewells) ; *«Dans un miroir»* (In the looking-glass), etc...

Spaak is a highly fertile writer, whose work is often very successful. A very varied writer and rightly ambitious.

He can write an attractive comedy in the manner of the Spanish Golden Century, like *«Les signols de Castille»*. He can depict the struggle of a young woman against the memory of a dead husband, as in *«L'Absent»*. In a technically accomplished play like *«La Rose des Vents»* he can describe all the facets, every possible aspect of a great love, showing its tender and cruel truth which it involves.

But above all, Claude Spaak is fascinated by the problems that confront present-day man.

(1) He adapted one of his films as a very pleasant comedy, *«Premier Bal»* (First Ball), which was shown at the «Théâtre des Galeries» in 1947.

SMALL SOLITARY FLAME...

social, political or religious imperatives are an absolute value? Should they prevail over a sentiment that lies in the hearts of all men, the sense of human brotherhood? These are the questions confronting Claude Spaak's characters.

The Italian innkeeper in «*L'Heure sonnera*» does not want to be involved in politics; but he risks his life to hide a fugitive from the fascist police.

The solidarity of man towards his fellow humans is also the subject of «*Trois fois le jour*». The three acts of this play take place at different periods, yet it is the same drama which recurs each time. In the days of Queen Elizabeth, a resolute Protestant helps a persecuted Catholic printer to escape. In 1793, a Republican mayor saves the neck of a Royalist. A white man in the south of the United States is killed saving a negro who is in danger of being lynched.

The following quotation from Spaak's introduction to this play explains his ethics perfectly:

«We know that, on 13 October 1761, the police came to arrest Calas, who was wrongly accused of having strangled his son because he wanted to be converted to Catholicism. The old man himself was a Calvinist.

He was condemned to death, the victim of religious passions and in spite of his constant denials. But as he was led away to prison on

13 October, Calas lit a candle in the passage of his house and told his wife: «There will be light when we return home».

I have often thought of this solitary little flame while writing «*Trois fois le jour*», a flame which, far from dying out in a few hours, went on shining forcefully, thanks to Voltaire. Since then, it has gone on lighting the conscience of all men, believers and unbelievers, who regard «thou shalt be tolerant» as the eleventh commandment».

Claude Spaak has always used his great dramatic talent to serve the cause of this light. He knows how to construct a story, to make his characters into flesh-and-blood people. His dialogue rings true and clear.

* * *

DENIS MARION AND HUMAN JUSTICE

«One trait in Denis Marion's character is that he can lie to no one».

This is culled from «*Mes Inscriptions*» (My notes) by the poet Louis Scutenaire.

If this man «who can lie to no one» lives away from his country, this is because he is a journalist, and his job keeps him in Paris.

A theatre and film critic (1), occasionally a fierce political polemicist (as shown by his collected articles «*Billets durs*» (Hard notes) published shortly before the war), he has also written : a novel ; a study of Daniel Defoe ; some wonderful imaginary dialogues between Socrates and his disciples, Mozart and Grimm, Dostoevsky and his beloved Anna («*Les Masques du Destin*» - The masks of destiny), etc. etc...

One of the problems that haunt this man, who was born in Brussels in 1906 and who worked as a barrister for close on twenty years, is the problem of human justice. The two plays by him which have been performed so far, both hinge on this problem.

The first, «*Le juge de Malte*» (The judge of Malta), which was shown at the «Théâtre Montparnasse» in Paris in 1948, describes a very odd case. It takes place in Malta, in the 18th century. Pietro the baker is caught by a patrol bending over a murdered man. He appears before the Judge Cambo, who is his customer and who is in a mild way courting the baker's wife. So the poor man, who is completely innocent, believes himself to be in good hands.

But when he appeals to the judge's friends, the latter refuses blankly. He extracts a confession from Pietro under torture and sentences him to death by hanging. Fortunately, highwayman who has meanwhile been caught for another crime, confesses to the crime for which Pietro has been condemned. He claims that, from his window, Judge Cambo observed the whole affair.

When the Grand Master of Malta voices surprise that Cambo had the unfortunate condemned in spite of this, knowing him to be completely innocent, our man replies :

— Who knew of it ? Cambo, the private individual, the owner of a house in the Borghese, perhaps. But not the magistrate. I could not take into account that which knew as a private individual.

In his indignation, the Grand Master forces Cambo to pay Pietro 10,000 ducats compensation, and to resign his office. Whereupon judge of Malta exclaims :

— By punishing me as you have done, I have committed the most monstrous judicial error of all time !»

Is it certain that there are no «judges of Malta» in our present Law Courts ?

«*L'Affaire Fualdes*» (The Fualdes affair), which was performed at the «Vieux-Colombier»

(1) Not content to be a critic, he also served André Malraux's assistant during the production of the film «*L'Espoir*» (Hope).

in 1950, relates a well-known murder that committed at Rodez in 1817, and the trial. The play is amusingly constructed in the manner of an old-fashioned melodrama. It turns around the astounding mythical character of Clarissa Manson. And contradicting herself constantly, this imaginative young woman was the principal witness for the prosecution, and she sent a tidal of innocent people to the scaffold. It again incites us to meditate on the fragile nature of human justice !

* * *

JOSÉ-ANDRÉ LACOUR

José-André Lacour was born at Gilly, near Charleroi, in 1919. In 1938, his first poems were awarded a prize by the review «L'Avant-Poste». Shortly after, with Alain Bosquet, he founded the review «Pylone».

His first novel «*Panique en Occident*» (Panic in the West) was published in Brussels in 1943 but banned in France by the German censorship. Inspired by the exodus of 1940, filled with noise and fury, with all the errors and genial characteristics of extreme youth, it heralded the advent of a vigorous writer. Other novels followed, including «*La mort en ce jardin*» (Death in this garden), of which Bunuel made such a good film, the poignant «*Venise en octobre*» (Venice in October), etc. etc...

But back to the theatre.

In 1943, the «Rideau de Bruxelles» gave the first performance of «*Tristan*». More than a play, this is a poem in dialogue, filled with a fiery, carnal lyricism. The drama of Tristan, torn as he is between two Isolde, the Fair one, and the one with the White Hands, is a magnificent chant, interrupted by moments of great dramatic tension.

Lacour went to Paris to find his fortune and, in order to make a living, turned out vast numbers of cow-boy stories, but he also went on writing for the theatre.

Two harsh, implacable melodramas achieved an encouraging measure of success : «*Notre peau*» (Our skin), shown at the Paris «Théâtre

MARTINI



«L'Année du Bac» by José-André Lacour

«Œuvre» in 1950, and «*Le temps nous a*» (Time has got us) which won the Enghien Prize for Dramatic Literature in 1952.

His play «*O, mes aïeux !*» (O, my forefathers), produced at the «Œuvre» in 1953, was not so well received.

His play «*L'année du Bac*» (The sixth-form year which has been acclaimed all over the country and which in 1958 had simultaneous performances at the Belgian National Theatre directed by Jacques Huisman) and at the Théâtre de la Ville «*Edouard VII*» in Paris (directed by Jean Robert.).

«L'ANNÉE DU BAC», THE PANGS OF YOUTH

«*L'année du Bac*», (literally, the year of the baccalauréat), when it appeared in 1958, highlighted the youth explosion, a phenomenon to which ten years afterwards we are slowly becoming accustomed and which we can observe with our own eyes as it evolves and assumes different forms.

The plot involves several families who all live in the same area of a provincial town. There is the Terrenoire family, which could be regarded as a model of its kind, for Mr. and Mrs.

Terrenoire understand their son, Mic. Listen as Father Terrenoire speaks to his wife :

— You know, even if we of our generation try to be pally with the young ones, for them we must be part of the Museum of Antiquity. I don't wear stiff collars and you can dance the cha-cha-cha better than a college girl, but we are still classified as parents — another world — the far slope of life.

This puts the problems squarely.

Mic is lucky, luckier than other boys of his generation in the same play. There is Micky, a girl who has been left to her own devices by her mother, and who takes her revenge by doing the strip-tease, free of charge, at the parties to which she is invited. Then there is Cachou, whose father is a down-trodden teacher and whose mother is a deeply embittered woman.

But especially there are the children of the retired general Guiraud-Gobit, Jacques and Evelyne. A real hero, a general ! To make heroes of his children too, he gives them a tough, military upbringing. Until the day it comes out that, in 1940, the general behaved as a complete coward.

Jacques Guiraud-Jobit kills himself when he learns the truth about his father. Mic feels desperate over the death of his friend ; he too has lost some of his illusions about his father. But Evelyne tells him :

— Good heavens, Mic, seeing the qualities you expect of fathers, I wonder which of you would be worthy of becoming one...

In a way, this is the moral of the play. «L'Année du Bac» — the sixth form year — is shown to be a period of initiation, a time when young people — through some minor and other major dramas, and not without some suffering — learn to become adults.

Lacour's next play, «*Mascarin*» (Fontaine Theatre, Paris, 1959) did not have such a good reception, yet it is a lusty comedy, with overtones of Molière, relating the extravagant career of a healer.

No other plays by José-André Lacour have been produced since then — except some excellent adaptations. It is to be hoped that more is to come: this top-class writer still inspires great expectations.

* * *

FÉLICIEN MARCEAU AND «L'ŒUF»

In the early days of his career, Félicien Marceau (born at Cortenberg in 1913) was Louis Carette. Under this name he published essays and novels (including «*Le Péché de complication*» — The sin of complication, 1942), worked as a journalist and broadcaster.

In 1944 he moved to Paris and assumed the name by which he is known today.

He then produced some excellent plays: «*Capri, petite île*» (Capri, a small island), «*Bergère légère*» (The frivolous Bergère), «*Les élans du cœur*» (The impulses of the heart); essays such as the fascinating «*Balzac et son monde*» (Balzac and his world). He began writing for the theatre.

His first play, «*Caterina*» (Atelier Theatre, Paris, 1954) brought its author not only success but the Pelman Prize for the Theatre. Two years later «*L'Œuf*» (The egg) had its first performance in the same theatre, with the same director, André Barsacq. Gabriel Marcel's introduction to this premiere that «27 December 1956 will be regarded as one of the salient dates in French contemporary theatre».

Why? What was there in «*L'Œuf*» which earned this remark from a leading critic and which kept it on the Paris billboards for more than two years?

Form, in the first place. Marceau based his play on one of his novels, «*Chair et os*» (Flesh and skin). And as the central character in the novel spoke in the first person singular,

'CEUF:

For left this unchanged : in the play too
character, Magis, who addresses the
in the first person. The play consists
Monologue, illustrated from time to time
scene from the life of Magis and those
him : his friends, his colleagues in the
his wife and her parents.

above all there is Magis himself. What an
ing character ! This commonplace man
from a fearful complex : he feels he is
ed outside the hostile or merely indiffe-
circle of his fellow-creatures, the Others...
who, as the hackneyed phrase goes,
up fit as a fiddle» :

«E, I never wake up fit as a fiddle. Never.
see the world before me, like an egg,
ooth, snug, closed. And what's inside ?
An fit as a fiddle. All except me. Me alone.
apt out. Different. A case. That awful chap.
The guilty one...

tries in vain to break out of his isolation,
et in touch with the Others. He tries every-
g. As Hortense his wife is having an affair
his friend Dugommier, he demands
tent from the latter for each of his meet-
with Hortense. On the surface this seems
inable, but in fact it is yet one more effort
accepted, to break the shell of «The

them ! When I was reaching out to them
with both hands !

In the end, Magis finds a way into «The Egg» :
by indulging in concealment, lies, giving way to
prejudice, constant pretence. Only thus is he
accepted into the social network.

At the outcome of a diabolical scheme, he kills
his wife and plants the crime on Dugommier,
who is sentenced for it. Gloating gently, Magis
remarks :

— Now it's Dugommier's turn. His turn to see
the egg before him. An egg closed on all
sides. With me hidden inside it, not showing
anything.

When I was making this effort to join them,
to be with them still, what I could not for-
give was that they scorned it, that they
made it stupid, laughable. For one day I
realised they took me for a madman. For a
madman ! Me ! When I was crying out to

FROM MAGIS'S ALIBI-LIE, TO BERNARD'S PASSION-LIE

In his next plays, Marceau displayed the same moral nihilism, the same derisive laughter, yet they were all delightfully amusing. For these horror-plays all made the audiences laugh tremendously.

In «*La bonne Soupe*» (The good life), shown at the «Gymnase» in Paris in 1958, he used the same technique as in «*The Egg*», but multiplied it by two : he shows the principal character, Marie-Paule, in her youth and in middle-age, played by two different actresses who are on stage at the same time, with a running commentary by the older one on the actions of the younger version.

Marie-Paule, a shockingly venal woman, suffers all her life from the fear of having to do without. In order to gain wealth and regard, to ensure «*the good life*», she will prostitute herself in every way, indulge in every turpitude. When she attains the summit of her triumphant and revolting career, she imagines she can afford to allow herself one sincere impulse, a single disinterested gesture, but her whole edifice crumbles.

«*L'Etouffe Chrétien*» (Killer of christians), which was first performed at the «Renaissance» in Paris in 1960, is about Nero. A man whose soul is as rent with desperation as that of Magis or Marie-Paule, but who is an emperor. The play enjoyed only moderate success. Yet some regard it as the author's masterpiece :

Robert Kanters described the hero as
clowning brother of Camus's Caligula.

«*Les Cailloux*» (Pebbles — Atelier Theatre ris, 1962) is a series of sketches about «*dolce vita*» set in Capri. It is a series of caricatures : « a living charnel-house, a charnel-house », commented Jean-Jacques Gautier.

Two more comedies. «*Madame Prince*» (Gymnase Theatre, Paris, 1965) : in this simple sets up a scheme to kidnap rich women. «*La preuve par quatre*» (Proof by four) was staged at the Michodière Theatre in 1964 : a man tries to divide his love between four women each of whom has a special charm for him.

Félicien Marceau's last play, «*Un jour fa contre la Vérité*» (One day I ran into the truth which was staged at the «Comédie Champs-Élysées» in Paris in 1967, is about a liar. But this time he is a liar proud of the fact and who claims that liars see the truth, for they are the only to know the difference».

Whatever one may feel about Marceau's plays it has to be recognized that both as playwright and content, he is a outstandingly playwright.

BOOK TO BELGIUM

to Belgium for an inventory of Belgian writers living in their country, who have been excluded in the post-war years. There are many of them. As already explained, the Belgian writer makes a steady consumption of native writers, which is a comforting fact.

It is extremely difficult to make a selection, without risking injustice or error. Three hundred years from now, an author who may only be mentioned briefly, together with the title of his play, may either be completely forgotten, or may be regarded as the major figure of the temporary theatre in Belgium...

And so we shall attempt to give an opinion. The names of five authors stand out, both as regards the extent of their production, their work at home and abroad, and the ambition reflected in their work. Let us name these «Big Five»: one of whom is a woman — ladies first, and the other four are listed in alphabetical order: Suzanne Lilar, Charles Bertin, Jean Gégé, Georges Sion, Paul Willems.

* * *

SUZANNE LILAR AND ECSTASY

«All the characters are tempted by God».

This is what Suzanne Lilar writes in the preface to her play, «*Tous les chemins mènent au ciel*» (All roads lead to heaven). All these characters are seeking ecstasy, the road that leads to heaven; it is an itinerary that often touches on carnal lust. Is this not blasphemous?

The author explains:

«In this play, there is a rapprochement between religious rapture and the rapture of love. Nothing could be more in keeping with tradition. The only people who will be shocked are those who have found nothing in love but inconsequential games or a gross gratification of the appetite».

This of course is dangerous territory. Quietism and molinism lurk behind the corner, and these, as we know, are heresies that have often been condemned. But Suzanne Lilar is not one of those authors who let their characters go soft. She expects them to be strict at all times, to show a sort of asceticism even when they give in to the flesh:

«Everything here depends on the quality of the soul. For some poets, drug-induced raptures are a means of investigating the hereafter. Is rapture valid only when it is lucid?»

In «*Le Burfador*», Don Juan tells his mistress Isabella:

— I liked your obstinate way of watching me as I took you.

To which she replies :

— Sometimes I refused to take my pleasure, so as to be lucid for yours».

A difficult path indeed : surrender to the flesh — lucidity — renunciation — and then a great leap to rapture — unless it be a refusal of rapture. We find ourselves in a thicket of conflict, struggle and contradiction.

«The fundamental theme of her theatre — Julien Gracq has written of Suzanne Lilar (1) — is the conflict between the temptation of quietist rapture, the surrender of the whole being to vertigo and consent, and the will to dominate these supreme transports through a kind of sombre thirst for lucidity and extreme consciousness».

Let us therefore take a closer look at Suzanne Lilar's three plays.

«LE BURLADOR»

The Don Juan depicted by Suzanne Lilar in «*Le Burlador*» (Théâtre Saint-Georges, 1964) is, in the words of Francis Ambrière: «...a demanding character in quest of absolute, who regards it as his destiny to awaken in each woman something grave and eternal ; an idealistic and, I might even say, mystical Don Juan, in contrast with Don Juan the epicure, or rather the pig in the house of Epicurus».

In each of his conquests, it was the soul that he loved most, and the piercing revelation brought them. It is said of him that «he loved to uncover vocations».

Here then we have the conquering hero in the middle age. He who for the whole of his life has sought in vain the accomplishment of his destiny, thinks to find it through his love for a young duchess Isabella.

«This is the plot — the author writes in the preface : Don Juan loves Isabella. He loves her when he tells her so. Sincere also when he says : «For the first time, I think I could be faithful». What he means is that if he could follow his inclination, he would be true to her. There are few things between him and the fidelity for which he hankers as he hankers for rest and the natural bent of his love for one thing : the seducer's calling, the desire for the tyranny of the *Burlador*».

Don Juan loves Isabella. Yet he cannot. He is a deflowering young Anna d'Ulloa, the Countess of Ulloa.

(1) Preface by Julien Gracq to Suzanne Lilar's book

«Sixty years of Belgian theatre». Renaissance du Livre, Brussels, 1952.

her daughter. He kills his new conquest's
either and is prosecuted for his crime before
the law. He could easily defend himself, but
Anna tells him bitterly :

— Haven't you ever felt it ? Haven't you ever
felt the need for the other one, over and
over again, and at the same time a loathing,
a kind of saturation of the soul.

Don Juan realizes that he does indeed know
what this «saturation of the soul» means, and
he decides not to defend himself. In complete
lucidity he chooses the fulfilment of death.

By thus accepting his fate, he admits to his
failure. It is Isabella who is the victor in this
combat.

DO ALL ROADS LEAD TO HEAVEN ?

Suzanne Lilar's second play, «*Tous les chemins mènent au ciel*» (All roads lead to heaven), first performed at the Hébertot theatre in Paris in 1947, describes with more penetration still «the problems of terrestrial love and divine love, the link between sensuality and mysticism» (Francis Ambrière).

In the days of the «Bruges Matins», a young French knight seduces a young Flemish nun, Sister Lutgarde, who saves him from the massacre by hiding him in her cell.

Afterwards Lutgarde, abandoned, pregnant and ugly, scorned by all, takes refuge with a hermit in the forest. She imagines she has found the culmination of her love in the extreme abasement she is suffering. The hermit analyses her feelings :

— Since you have been here, you take pleasure in degrading yourself. Each privation is a pretext for yet further humiliation... And you are happy !

What an odd man this hermit is. Suzanne Lilar admits that originally she conceived him as a saint, but that he escaped her control and forged his own character. He is the man of the soil. He fights against the ethereal plane on which the knight and Lutgarde hope to commune. He separates them just as they are about to be reunited. He makes them agree to eternal separation.

It is difficult to decide if he is a sage or a demon as, before God, he declaims his right to dignity, to lucidity, to refuse ecstasy for himself and others :

— Where am I going ? I don't know, and it doesn't matter. In truth, Lord, allow a man to tell you : all roads lead to heaven, but heaven is not made for men.

A strange play, one that exalts through its very obscurity and contradictions.

The author's third play «*Le Roi lépreux*» (Le leper king — «Theatre du Parc», Brussels, 1951) has a plot patterned on Pirandello, in which the actors and the characters they personify — Crusaders fighting in the Holy Land — mingle in the end into a single reality.

Since then, Suzanne Lilar has written no more for the theatre, but she has published psychological essays which have received praise in many countries. Suzanne Lilar is the mother of Françoise Mallet-Joris, a brilliant novelist now living in Paris, who has also written some excellent adaptations of foreign plays.

* * *

CHARLES BERTIN AND THE DRAMA OF SOLITUDE

When the «Rideau de Bruxelles» presented Charles Bertin's first play «*Les Prétendants*» (The pretenders) in 1947, Honoré Lejeune, the critic, described the young author as «a clever writer, very clever, perhaps too clever». It was a compliment, combined with a feeling of concern. This concern was dispelled entirely by Bertin's second play. It showed that Bertin's cleverness should not be confused with facility, that it was simply that rare and precious thing: an author in complete command of his craft as a writer of drama.

Charles Bertin was born in Mons in 1919. He studied Law at Brussels University, and he has made a career in government service. He has

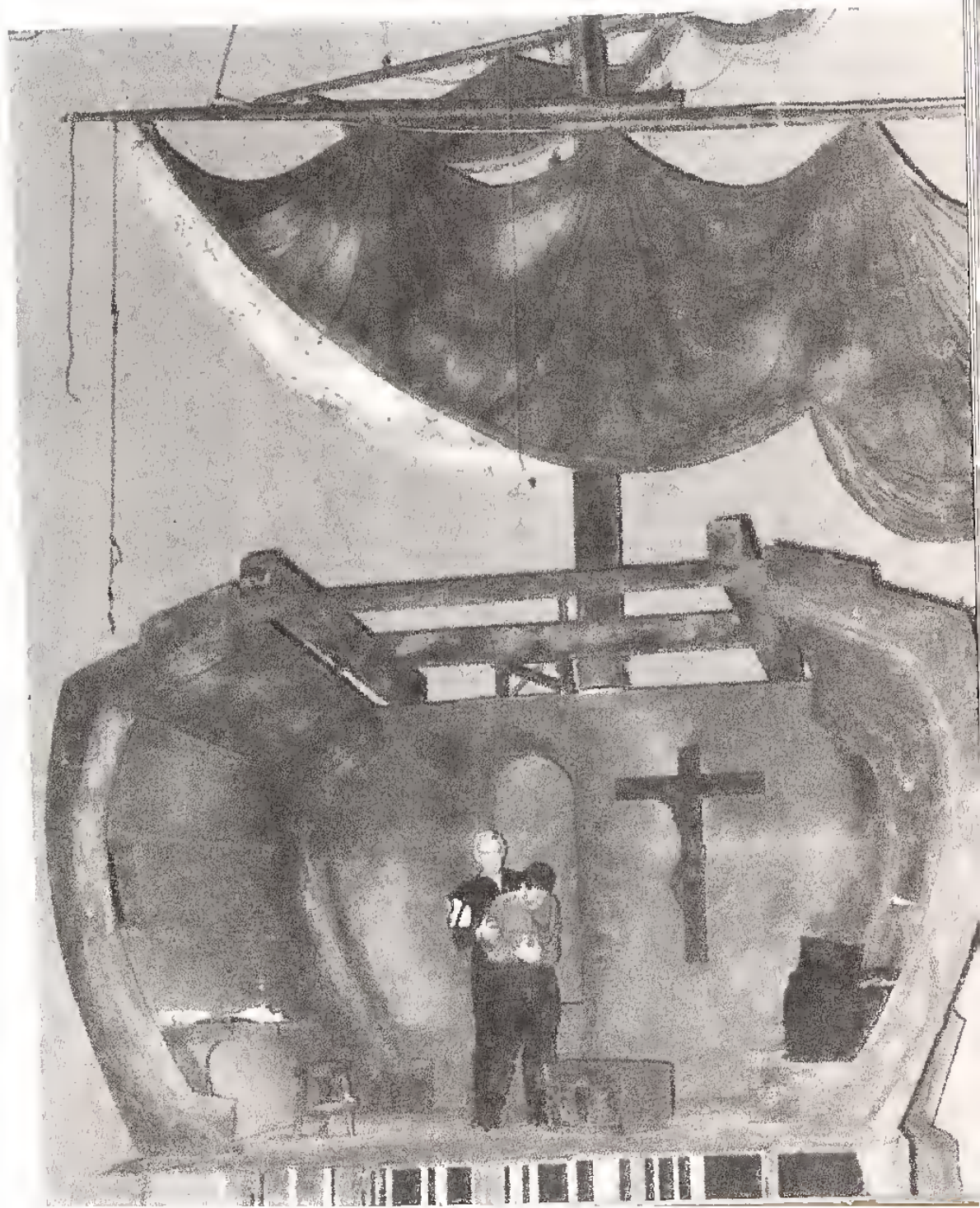
been made a member of the Belgian Royal Academy of French Language and Literature. As an author he began first of all to write poetry, which was published in 1947 in a volume entitled «*Psaumes sans la grâce*» (Psalms without grace).

Even now Bertin is still a poet. A poet of the theatre. A poet in his novels too. As the nephew of Charles Plisnier he has carried on a family tradition with his novels «*Journal d'un crime*» (Diary of a crime — 1961) and «*Le Bas Age*» (The best years) which won the Rosset Prize in 1963.

As to Bertin's work, this is concerned entirely with different facets of one and the same drama, the drama of human solitude.

— You must understand! I have crossed a great desert, with no other companion but my own violence.

This appeal is from Madeleine in «*Les Prétendants*». The man she loves loves someone else Mathilda his wife, and in order to conquer this love that escapes her Madeleine will resort to the vilest acts. In the end she accepts defeat and goes away. Alone.



«Christopher Columbus»
by Charles Bertin

THE CURSE OF DON JUAN

«A drama of solitude in love» — that is how the author himself describes «*Don Juan*» (Théâtre du Parc, 1948). Clearly the absolutist playwrights of Belgium are obsessed with Don Juan.

Suzanne Liar's Burlador was, in spite of everything, a chivalrous, noble creature. Bertin's Don Juan is satanic, enveloped in flames.

From the very first scene, he can be seen addressing to his latest conquest, the Duchess Isabelle, declarations of love that ring true and sincere. But this is because he knows that his previous conquest, Dona Laura, is spying upon them, hidden behind a curtain. When the scene is over, he draws the curtain aside with a flourish :

— LAURA : Don Juan, one day you shall be punished !

— DON JUAN : So I have often been told, Signora. But for the time being, I am very well.

Shameless man ! First he tortures Laura, and then we see him torturing Isabelle, whom he has used to attract another prey, young Anne d'Ulloa. He casts the unfortunate Isabelle aside, but takes her back again when she tells him of her forthcoming marriage. He tells her that he loves her. He orders her to kill herself and to kill her future husband, and as she sets out to obey, he calls her back and bursts out laughing. It is a cat-and-mouse game :

— ISABELLA : Juan, when shall you stop torturing me ?

— DON JUAN : Probably never !... that is — only form of faithfulness.

For Anne d'Ulloa the monster seems for once to feel sincere love. He goes to say farewell to the girl, who refuses his kiss :

— I am the only one to accept that you refuse my lips... I am almost happy that you dic

This is the first time he actually feels what he says. But the curse of Don Juan is still upon him. He cannot resist asking Anne for one last meeting, in her room at night, and she cannot help but agree.

The Commander appears and discovers the lovers' embrace. Don Juan kills him, and then exclaims :

— I was born to destroy. Farewell, Anne.

He goes off, alone, burdened with the curse of being Don Juan.

CHRISTO,
ON THE

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS OR THE LEADER'S SOLITUDE

In an interview which he granted when his «*Christopher Columbus*» was revived in 1966, Charles Bertin said the play was about the drama of solitude in the life of a leader. And he added :

«In his growing solitude, Columbus is the prey to three temptations that could be his undoing. Material temptation : the sailors are afraid and mutiny threatens. Spiritual temptation : the ship's chaplain, a typical man of the Middle Ages, is opposed to Columbus whom he brands as an experimenter. Sentimental temptation : Columbus's second-in-command, whom he would like to make his successor, abandons him. And when, finally, with America in sight, Columbus triumphs, he finds himself in total solitude. He has nothing left to lose».

Originally the play was written for broadcasting and, in this form, it was awarded the Italia Prize for 1953 and was translated into seven languages. It was first staged by the National Theatre, on 1 September 1958, in the large auditorium at the Brussels World's Fair.

The whole of the action takes place on board the Santa-Maria, either in the captain's cabin, or on deck, where the sailors tell of their growing anxiety.

At the end of the play, with a new continent in sight at last, Columbus becomes aware of his greatness, but also of his utter solitude :

— At this moment that God has given me, I want to be alone ! Alone as I always have been... Facing Columbus the deprived, Columbus the flouted, Columbus the battered, Columbus the madman, there is now Columbus the man of God !

THE JESTER KING : A GRANDSON OF CALIGULA

Mention should also be made of other, earlier works by Charles Bertin.

«*Colombe et le jeune homme*» (Colombe and the young man), first performed at the «Théâtre du Parc» in Brussels in 1949, is light entertainment in the manner of Anouilh's «rose-coloured plays».

On the other hand «*Les Folies Bergère*» (Rideau de Bruxelles, 1950) is, despite its misleading title, a highly dramatic play. It is the history of the Bergère family which is ravaged by the philandering of the head of the family, a sort of bourgeois Don Juan.

In 1963 the «Rideau de Bruxelles» presented a freely adapted version of «*L'Oiseau Vert*» (The Green bird) by Carlo Gozzi. In a light-hearted vein that was clearly shared by the actors, Charles Bertin succeeded here in recreating the magic and colour of the Commedia

dell'Arte. It was again at the «Rideau de Bruxelles» that Bertin's latest play, «*Le Roi Bonheur*» (The jester king) was first performed in 1966. This is a farce about the young king of an imaginary country. Charles Bertin describes the young monarch's philosophy as follows:

Whereas Caligula opted for murder, young King John opts for derision. He makes fun of his officials and foils inept conspiracies. The whole kingdom turns into a kind of circus in which clowns and jesters perform one by one, where principles and conventions are held up to ridicule.

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*

Jean Mogin, the son of the poet Norge, was born in Brussels in 1921, in the house that later witnessed the birth of the «Journal des Poètes».

This poet who has by a happy concurrence of circumstances been appointed head of spoken broadcasts at the Belgian Radio and Television (R.T.B.) — working hard despite his seeming unconcern — decided one day to write for the theatre.

His first try turned out to be a masterpiece. It was « *A chacun selon sa faim* » (To each according to his need) which the Raymond Herrer Company presented at the « Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier » in Paris on 17 February 1950. After the premiere, Francis Ambrière wrote in « *Opera* » :

"I am happy to salure the debut of Mr. Jean Mogin, about whom I know nothing except that he is under thirty and that in his very first play he attains a style and discipline such as only great playwrights possess».

What is this play that proved such an outstanding success both with the Paris audiences and with the critics? The most austere tale imaginable.

It is based on historic fact. In the 19th century, a young nun Maria de Mello, the superior of a convent in the Portuguese countryside, rebels against the Church. Why? Because she thirsts for the absolute. Because she does not want to be girls in her charge to be in contact with the foolish and unworthy priest who is their confessor. She drives him out and refuses to let any other priest into the convent. Henceforth, she hears confession and celebrates mass, filled with a mad love for God.

— I love God. What do I want with doctors and doctrines? Do you want me to lead my flock, a book in my hand? The Heart is enough... God is to each according to his need. I am his unreservedly.

That is what this implacable spirit tells the delegate whom the bishop has despatched to lead her back to the path of obedience. Obey, she will not. She is afire with love, with rebellion. The convent is surrounded by soldiers, and also by a crowd of spiteful villagers. The nuns flee, but Maria stays on. The convent is set on fire. When at last she is taken from the flames, she is crushed and dying.

In the throes of death, she finds peace at last :

— I broke away from your Roman rules and precepts, but do not bear malice with me. All is well again... I led you on to the limits of temptation, just as you urged me on.

And at the same time I was following my God, who is your God too. He was offered to me on the condition that I accept you as my executioners, that you accept me as your victim.

And so she dies. The people who killed her are already veering round and beginning to regard her as a saint.

THE COTTON BARRICADE

After the triumph it enjoyed in Paris, «*A cha-cun selon sa faim*» was performed all over the world, in Canada, Madagascar, Tunis and Helsinki.

Mogin's second play «*Le Rempart de coton*» (The cotton barricade), which was staged by the Hermantier Company in 1952, was not as well received by the Paris critics. Yet this is highly unfair, as will be appreciated by those who read this fine play. This too is the story of an uncompromising spirit. The action takes place at the end of the War of Secession. A young southern planter, André Redortiers, refuses to concede defeat. He barricades himself in his house, behind bales of cotton, and decides to hold out to the end.

None of his nearest and dearest succeed in changing his mind: his wife Isabelle, and a cousin Eleanor, whom he used to love deeply. He refuses these temptations of happiness, for it is another type of happiness that he demands:

— I want to meet death suddenly, like a gulp of icy water that takes your breath away and floods you with a dreadful and final happiness.

Then there is the temptation of politics. The dialogue between André Redortiers and Governor Molines, who begs him to capitulate in order to avoid needless suffering (the peren-

nial pretext!) is worthy of the confrontation between Creon and Antigone. André Redortiers will not give in, and he killed in the collapse of his cotton barricade.

THE GIRL BY THE FOUNTAIN

With his third play, Jean Mogin again had an outstanding success. Called «*La Fille à la fontaine*» (The girl by the fountain) it was staged with great success by the Hermantier Company at the Nîmes Festival in 1955 and shown the following year by the Belgian National Theatre. It was based on an actual happening:

«I share the vice of most hall-porters: I like to know what is happening to people... That's why I was greatly affected by a three-line item which, like you, I read in the papers last year: a girl had spent forty-eight hours at the door of her fiancé, who refused to see her. The villagers, who had at first mocked her, later turned against her tormentor».

This is what Chiari, the obstinate girl, says on the second day of her vigil by the fountain in front of her faithless fiancé's house, in reply to the villagers' pleas that she should go back to her mother:

— I refuse, I refuse with joy; what happiness there is in the word, what deliverance!

refuse all reason, all caution. Yes I refuse, refuse for evermore to give myself to you, to your little helpings of tenderness, and I dedicate myself to voracious love, even if it destroys me... Come, let us say farewell. I am leaving, I am breaking with you ; but I do so without rancour. It has to be, and you know that there is nothing left for us to do together...

Ziari, a girl consumed by passion, ready to take flight, to break with everything that is not her love, is clearly the sister of Maria de Mello and of André Redortiers.

A QUEEN FOR NINE DAYS

In 1963 the «Rideau de Bruxelles» presented «*La Reine de neuf jours*» (A queen for nine days) which related the story of the sixteen-year old queen, Jane Grey, who was supplanted by her cousin Mary Tudor and beheaded after reigning over England for little more than a week. The story of Jane's love for her young husband is the story of a great love. She imagines that she could make him the magnificent gift of a crown, and lives through moments of sheer enchantment. But suddenly the fairy tale turns to drama. The young queen, forced to become a heroine, assumes a new dimension and goes to her death with dignity.

Jean Mogin has proved that he can also write in lighter vein. «*Archanges Gabriel*» (Archangel Gabriel), first performed at the Gymnase theatre in Liege in 1966, is high farce. Relating the many efforts needed to persuade a prince to share his young bride's bed and thus ensure the continuity of the royal line, it raised the vigorous laughter it was intended to provoke.

Lastly, «*Le Mystère de la Nativité, de la Passion et de la Résurrection de Notre Seigneur*» (Mystery of the Nativity, Passion and Resurrection of Our Lord), performed at the National Theatre in 1966, is a collation of medieval texts from France and Wallonia. In a setting representing a cathedral in the course of construction, this illustrated the faith of those who performed the mysteries and miracles of old. Here again, Jean Mogin proved that he was both a playwright and a poet.

* * *

GEORGES SION OR THE INSTINCT FOR HAPPINESS

In «*Le Jeu de Marie de Nivelles*» (Pageant of Mary of Nivelles) an ambitious open-air performance staged to commemorate the 750th anniversary of Marie d'Oignies, a saint from Nivelles, Georges Sion had his main character say the following prayer :

— And be thanked, oh Lord, even if the word happiness is a difficult one».

The whole of Sion's work seems to be a meditation on happiness. Happiness of the flesh, terrestrial happiness in the first place ; and a more demanding happiness next.

A few words first about this fortunate writer, who has known nothing but success since his first play, «*La Matrone d'Ephèse*» (The matron of Ephesus), was selected for the first performance of the newly formed «Rideau de Bruxelles» in 1943.

Georges Sion was born at Binche in 1913. After graduating in Law at the University of Louvain, he soon turned from the law to literature. Director of the «*Revue Générale Belge*», a respected critic, professor of dramatic writing, and a talented lecturer, he is also a member of the Belgian Royal Academy of French Language and Literature. He has travelled extensively and has written about his travels in America and the Congo. He has written some amusing treatises on «*Le Théâtre français d'entre-deux-guerres*» (The French theatre between the two wars) and «*La Conversation française*» (French conversation).

FROM THE LADY OF EPHESUS TO THE GRAND DUKE OF THE WEST

Let us start with the «*Matrone d'Ephèse*». According to the tale told by Petronius, a disconsolate widow refuses to leave her husband's grave. Yet she ends up finding consolation in the arms of a sturdy soldier. And, in order to save her lover's life, she even consents to have her husband's body hung from the gallows, instead of the prisoner whom the soldier, with other things on his mind, had guarded so poorly. Love always entails some sacrifice...

Although this can be regarded as light entertainment, Romain Sainvic commented as follows :

«This fresh comedy, bearing the scent of Greece, was like a breath of fresh air waiting through those endless wartime winters».

The matron is a lady whose happiness is of the flesh. Quite different is the lofty happiness sought by the imperious hero of «*Charles le Téméraire*» (Charles the Bold - «Rideau de Bruxelles», March 1944). Towards the end of the play, as the Grand Duke of the West prepares to leave on his last campaign, we hear him in conversation with his second wife Margaret of York, and with his daughter Marie of Burgundy. Recalling one of her grandmother's remarks, Marie observes in somewhat melancholy fashion :

— Does a prince's life have to be so constrained ? I remember something the lady Isabelle said a few months before her death

princes should practise finding happiness in their duty.

Charles defines this duty in a scene one is tempted to describe as «Shakespearean» — for there is a similar one in *Henry IV* — in which he addresses his dying father, Philip the Good. This is the promise he makes :

— I shall keep everything you leave me, our land of Flanders and the tapestry cities, Brabant that feeds us, Namur and Luxemburg with their forests, Liege which is as handsome as Rome on the river Meuse, the Duchy of Burgundy whose wines you love, Dijon where we were born. I owe you gratitude for assembling our possessions, rendering justice which is the principal virtue. And if I make war, because I am forced to, it shall be to give our lands the assurance they need.

Charles stands by his promise. We shall see him resisting Louis XI, «the universal spider». We shall also see this good father and loving husband breaking the bonds of love and tenderness, to set off on new adventures. No matter how exhausted, he will always set off again. Until he suffers his last betrayal, his ultimate defeat. Then he exclaims :

— Let them go who have no more courage or faith. I shall attack Nancy with only ten men if they are the only ones left. Then I should die with at least ten brave men at my side. I should fight even if I were alone. You may think this is madness. Perhaps the world is becoming a realm of rogues and

traitors. Perhaps it is old-fashioned to believe in such things as honour and chivalry. If so, perish the world, or let me perish ! I shall be the last of the knights.

So he throws himself into the fray and is killed.

ALL HAPPINESS ENTAILS SACRIFICE

In 1945, Georges Sion celebrated the liberation of his country, the land he loves so much :

«...the land of Belgium, a lighter moored in the North, weighty as an island and laden with opulence» (Charles the Bold), by presenting a play specially written for the occasion «*L'Arbre de la Liberté*» (The tree of liberty - Theatre du Parc) in collaboration with Henri Soumagne (1). Next, Sion wrote a delightful fantasy in the manner of Giraudoux, «*Cher Gonzague*» (Dear

(1) Apart from «*L'Arbre de la Liberté*» and an adaptation of Goethe's «*Egmont*» (Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, 1945), Henry Soumagne (1891-1951) produced most of his work between the two wars. Soumagne was a leading playwright of his generation, comparable to Crommelynck and Ghelderode, thanks to plays like «*Bas Noyard*» (Théâtre du Marais, 1924), «*L'Autre Messie*» (The other Messiah) and «*Madame Marie*» (Théâtre de l'Œuvre, Paris, 1923 and 1928).

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«The traveller of Forceloup» by Georges Sic-

Gonzague) which was staged by the «Rideau de Bruxelles» in 1947. This again is concerned with happiness, happiness that has to be paid for at its proper price. Françoise and Colette are two young women living in an old castle that is haunted by the lovable ghost Gonzague. But before the young ladies find happiness with the men of their choice, and before Gonzague the friendly ectoplasm can bill and coo in the hereafter with a ghostly lady named Catherine, the castle has to be given away, not sold. The achievement of happiness of any kind always entails some sort of sacrifice.

«*Princesse de Chine*» (Princess from China, National Theatre, 1962) takes up the theme of «*La Princesse Turandot*» (Princess Turandot) by Carlo Gozzi. The cruel princess who has all her unsuccessful suitors killed, is shown here to be simply a timid young woman who disguises her modesty as pride, even though she is hankering for a great love. How well Sion tells this enchanting story.

THE TRAVELLER OF FORCELOUP

This is probably Georges Sion's principal play, the one into which he has poured the most of himself : «*Le Voyageur de Forceloup*» (The traveller of Forceloup - Rideau de Bruxelles, 1951).

The action is set in an isolated farm in the Ardennes forest called «Forceloup». The time is the Middle Ages, when pilgrims travelled along the roads of christendom, assured always of finding a welcome, friendship and respect. Fabre, the master of Forceloup, lived in the house with his wife Bella, who was as beautiful as her name. One day this strong and upright man was struck down by a malady that was the most dreadful of all in those days of burning faith : he began to doubt.

«He was afraid of losing his faith. This is a fear that can come to men and prevent them living in peace. He had no education, he saw no one at Forceloup. He wanted to ask questions. He felt himself to be one of the damned because he doubted».

So Fabre took to the road to search for ways of regaining his faith.

Some time later a Traveller comes to Forceloup, a type of pilgrim, and he is given accommodation. This deeply religious man proves to possess a strange power : through prayer he can transfer to himself the ills that other men suffer from.

Doucet, who is engaged to Claire, Bella's young cousin, has a serious leg injury. This

heals with miraculous suddenness, but now it is the Traveller whose leg has a deep gash.

Tired of waiting for her husband, Bella has taken as her lover a former soldier called Guillaume. There is a bond of savage passion between them. The Traveller transfers Guillaume's sin to himself. Purified, the soldier leaves Bella. But now it is the Traveller who is devoured by desire for the young woman, a desire which he resists as best he can.

After a long absence Fabre, Bella's husband, returns home. He knows all about Bella's passion for Guillaume, but the latter has gone for ever. Fabre understands and forgives. Bella finds peace again in her husband's arms.

Alas, Fabre himself has not yet found peace. He has travelled in vain, sought the counsel of priests and scholars. Doubt is still firmly lodged in the recesses of his soul, devouring him like some wild animal.

There is only one hope left to him. He learns that it was the Traveller who healed Doucet's injury and who cured Guillaume of his guilty love. He asks to be cured too.

At first the Traveller is appalled at the thought of this further trial, the most dreadful of all. But once again, his love for his fellow-man leads him to accept this burden.

He addresses a prayer to God, the God he will soon be doubting and probably abjure :

— Lord, this may be my last prayer to You as a friend for a long time. I may come to suspect You, to close my eyes to your Light. I do not know the country in which I shall be travelling if You so desire. I only know

its frightful aridity because one day I saw a man returning from the land of thirst. I offer up to You my sorrow and the indifference I shall display towards you.

He goes away. We shall not see him suffering from the thirst and aridity he has accepted. As to Fabre, we only know that he has been cured of his tormenting doubt from this line, the last in the play, the line he speaks after the Traveller's departure : « I am beginning to pray for him ».

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PAMELA'S TRUNK

In the authors discussed in the preceding chapters were men in search of the absolute, outside any specific religious creed. Georges Sion on the other hand is a deeply christian writer, akin to Claudel, Bernanos, Graham Greene or Ugo Betti. This he proved again with an act of faith, «*Le Jeu de Marie de Nivelles*» (1963), already described above.

Having sacrificed everything to the divine love that consumes her, young Marie d'Oignies finds fulfilment at last as she is dying. St. John appears to her and says :

— It is time for you to find at last the Happiness you divined, your turn has come to hear the Heart of God beating with eternal love. Come, Mary, come.

But Sion, though deeply religious, can also be a highly entertaining writer. «*La Malle de Pamela*» (Pamela's trunk, Rideau de Bruxelles, 1955), set in scenery reminiscent of the great English writers of the 18th century, Fielding or Smollet, relates the tribulations of a young woman who tours the world in search of the last letter which her late husband, a dreaded privateer, had written to her. Pamela travels to the ends of the earth to find a happiness that was actually within hand's reach. Only when she is back home from her travels does she realize that she is beloved by her faithful travelling companion, young Michael. At last he is bold enough to declare his love :

— MICHAEL : Pamela, I love you !

— PAMELA : At last ! To think that women usually hear these words after a mere walk round the garden !

This is Sion's moral : love can be found only after a long voyage : you cannot simply find it at the bottom of the garden.

Before leaving this writer, let us quote something he said about the role of the theatre more than thirteen years ago, and which is still valid today :

«In dark ages, art is invaluable because of the form which it gives the darkness. Today, the theatre is in a state of grace because our century is in a state of sin. The century has endowed the theatre with a great and bitter favour. It has entrusted the theatre with all its secrets, it looks to the theatre to elucidate and interpret them. Later on it will be clear that, between 1930 and 1955, the theatre was the principal stadium, the most frequented confessional, the most penetrating voice».

Change 1955 tot 1969, and this observation still applies.

* * *

PAUL WILLEMS AND THE BEAUTY OF GARDENS

In attempting to describe the work at Paul Willems, we should first quote the conclusion of his novel «La Chronique du Cygne» (The swan's chronicle) :

«...it was on my bended knees that I watched and listened to the beauty of gardens».

This is the ethic of Paul Willems, a poet fascinated with the bewitching effect of the familiar. He himself was born in a garden, on 4 April 1912, in the castle of Missembourg, at Edegem near Antwerp, which is still inhabited by his mother, the novelist Marie Gevers.

Young Willems, the brother of «Madame Orpha» and «La Comtesse des Dignes», first studied Law at Brussels University but then went to work at the Palais des Beaux-Arts and stayed there : today he is its Director-General, as well as being president of the «Jeunesses Musicales» (Musical Youth) and Director of the «Association pour la Diffusion Artistique et Culturelle» (Association for Artistic and Cultural Diffusion).

He began by publishing short stories and novels which showed already what the characters in his play would be like : he brings the most every-day objects into contact with the stars, describes people and feelings such as one meets every day, but moving in the realm of the unusual and the marvellous, somewhere over the rainbow. The titles of these books are «Tout est réel ici» (Everything is real here, 1941), «L'Herbe qui tremble» (Tremulous grass,

1942), «Blessures» (Injuries, 1945) and «La Chronique du Cygne» (The swan's chronicle, 1949).

Then came the day when, as already explained, Claude Etienne read «Tout est réel ici» and commissioned the author to write a play. The result was «Le bon Vin de M. Nuche» (The good wine of Mr. Nuche - «Rideau de Bruxelles», 1949).

LE BON VIN DE M. NUCHE

As the curtain rises, the first line of Paul Willems's dialogue for the theatre runs as follows :

— THE ASTRONOMER : (He is wearing morning coat and looks like one of the scientists in children's story-books). — From here, from this square in the upper part of the city, I can see as complete a collection of stars as can be seen anywhere in the world. They look like thousands of shiny shells, thrown up on a beach of black sand by a wave more powerful than the Atlantic itself. On the days when God takes his bath in the ocean of the night, shooting stars rush everywhere like phosphorescent fishes in flight. Amid these shells and fishes, my telescope detects the planets. They are lovely mermaids with rings on their fingers, their hair dotted with lights called satellites. When the sky is cloudy I aim my telescope

at the town and I contemplate the most complete collection of windows to be seen anywhere in the world. Some of the women I see at these windows are as lovely as the stars...

One of the houses in the astronomer's telescope is that of Mr. and Mrs. Nuche, a dreadfully bourgeois couple, who beat Martin their valet and who are turning their daughter Isabelle into a stupid fool.

— ISABELLE :

I read the weeklies, I listen to the radio,

I should like to know about men

But I'm afraid when they touch me

I don't know what I want

My name is Isabelle, Isabelle Nuche

At school my friends all call me Isaacruche

(stupid Isabel).

All goes well until the day poor Martin, quite desperate, drinks from a bottle in Mr. Nuche's cupboard which is marked «POISON». But the label was misleading. Filled with a bottle of excellent wine Martin falls into the company of two tramps who teach him what to say to Isabelle, how to conquer her love :

— Leave your shoes at the door
And take off your white dress.

Come with me
Between the crisp fresh sheets.

Martin says all this and many other sweet words, and he wins through. There is a happy ending, with the lovers united, and the Astro-nomer in charge :

— Isabelle and Martin, hold each other's hand ; listen to me, and seek no more, you have found paradise.

Like most first plays, «*Le bon vin*» had its faults. But by the time Willems wrote his second play, these failings had disappeared. He gave the theatre a new style. He bewitched his audiences in an entirely novel manner, elusive as the mists on the Scheldt ; familiar as a chair, a table, or a daisy ; and at the same time as fanciful as a celebration in some secret garden, a celebration reserved for fairies, talking birds, little children, wise and kind old men, young girls and poets.

This celebration consists so far of ten turns... or rather, ten plays. It would be difficult to choose between ten such kaleidoscopic marvels. Should one prefer «*Lamentable Julie*» (Poor Julie - Rideau, 1949) relating the third conquest of the libidinous, forever drowsy and bigamous Erneston, to «*Air barbare et tendre*» (Barbarous but tender air - Rideau 1952), which tells of the strange adventure of the fisherman Pino, his shrewish wife Pinoche, their daughter Rose Pino, and of the duplicated fish Profond, the horse Lazarus, Baron Ventre Saint-Fion and other equally important noblemen ?

Let me tell you the plot of «*Peau d'Ours*» (Bearskin - National Theatre 1951). Once upon a time there was a soldier who, for seven years, refused to take off his bearskin, which covered him from head to foot, in order to become rich and marry Minou, the daughter of Mr. Boule. He became so dirty and matted that the birds used to nest in his beard. But his patience was rewarded and he married

Minou. The characters however also include two teasing birds, Mr. and Mrs. Pic, the Sun which is also the Moon, the butcher Pacotin, Jules who became mute because of a caramel, Leon, the happy imbecile who marries Minou's sister, Mariette, etc... etc. !

This is what the Sun (which is also the Moon) says when the lovers are united :

— There they are garbed in their love as a tree is garbed in its leaves. Trees, stop rustling ; leaves, stop moving light, stop singing... Listen, listen to the warm silence that comes to our soul when we can watch a pageant of simple things...

FROM EEL BEACH TO THE DOG OFF

The plays of Paul Willemms are armfuls of images which he casts before our astonished eyes. You cannot take everything in. There is too much of it : too much bright or tender light, too much colour, not to mention the music. Let us try to list, haphazardly, some of the gems from this treasury.

«*La plage aux Anguilles*» (Eel Beach - «Rideau», 1959) is set in the upturned carcass of an old boat, on a bend of the river Scheldt, where wrecks come to rest ; it is inhabited by Phabus, an old sailor ; there is also the Good God, an old man who takes refuge in sleep at the slightest sign of trouble ; their friend young Laurent, who only dreams of travel :

— PHEBUS : Every time a ship goes by, there are waves.

LAURENT : I have the feeling they whisper : come... come... come...

There are gangsters too : the Bigamist, Xury, Leon Veste ; and a dead body washed up on the mud...

«*Il pleut dans ma maison*» (It's raining in my house - Rideau, 1962) is about the Grand'Rosière estate, which stands by a pond. In order to save it, it is turned into a hotel. As you arrive, you receive a chestnut leaf, with the message :

«Let us dream, it is raining, our destiny is halted, dreams and reflections are our only freedoms».

Then there is the play who died long ago ; the sonorous day ; the sonorous course ; and midnight carps...
«Le Marché des Jawn - Rideau. Invented by rich M. (with Salad !) for M. with the True U... ket that sells po... rettes, feathers, bubbles and c... Jacky, the conf... all over the world nor of the Tob... rich Miss Clet... bicycle tour ; th... for disconsolat... dreadful disease the love betw... and the too d... of Baron Dupo... Salat' is ruin... cheques that...
«Off et la Juri Theatre, 1955 the prayer of...
— Saint Med... Pray for... Let me... Let no o... So that... Let them... Let me... So that... Let me...

Then there is the phantom of the young man
 who died long ago, on the eve of his wedding
 ; the sonorous fountain and lovers of
 ; and midday partridge soup as well as
 night carp soup...

«Le Marché des petites heures» (Market at
 Dawn - Rideau, 1966) : a phony slum area
 invented by rich M. Salat' (not to be confused
 with Salad !) for the benefit of those travelling
 with the True Universe Agency ; the flea mar-
 ket that sells polished pebbles, smokeless ciga-
 rettes, feathers, foolish songs, kites, soap
 bubbles and other similar marvels ; Tobago
 Jacky, the conjurer, who is wanted by police
 all over the world because he killed the Gover-
 nor of the Tobago Isles ; the affair between
 rich Miss Clette and that awful Miracelli ; a
 bicycle tour ; the love of tender Don Vasouille
 for disconsolate Annie ; «apple vapours», a
 dreadful disease that only afflicts rich people ;
 the love between the sentimental Exception
 and the too distinguished Mr. Fetch ; the love
 of Baron Dupont and Ceremonie Duvent ; M.
 Salat' is ruined and sells, at high cost, real
 cheques that bounce ; etc... etc... etc...

«Off et la lune» (Off and the moon - National
 Theatre, 1955) : all we need do here is quote
 the prayer of the dog Off :

— Saint Medor and saint Azor,
 Pray for me.
 Let the moon be overcast.
 Let no one die,
 So that I need not howl.
 Let them neither sell nor beat me.
 Let me have sides less lean,
 So that I need not howl.
 Let me not be run over

(Very softly)

And let me learn to speak

(Silence, then in a falsely detached manner)

And then, if you want to please me, give
 my master the idea that he should buy me a
 little tartan coat. It's very smart.

WARNA OR THE WEIGHT OF THE SNOW

Then there is «Warna ou le Poids de la neige»
 (Warna or the weight of the snow - Rideau,
 1963) the only drama that Paul Willems has
 written.

As the author himself explains :

«...I heard an echo of the past when I learned
 that in certain villages in Flanders there is a
 street called «black snow street» to commemo-
 rate some ancient famine. When ? A long
 time ago. First there had been the wars be-
 tween the Imperial troops and the French, and
 these were followed by serious risings. Then
 there was a harsh winter. People were so
 hungry that they could not bear the sight of
 the snow. They were so dazed that they
 imagined the land to be covered by some
 gigantic black pall woven by the black flakes.
 It seems that in those days packs of famished
 dogs came to attack the villages, and that
 some areas became entirely depopulated.
 Amid this anarchy, I visualise a castle protect-

ed by its ponds, with reserves of food sufficient to last for several years. Here lives Warne, an old woman given over entirely to a dream: her love for the knight Ernevalde.

She met Ernevelde twenty-five years before. Since then, everything has changed. Ernevelde has aged, and has become fat, gross and self-important. He has lost everything that he had in his youth. The country lies in ruin, and there is nothing left of the past, of Wanda's youth. Still she maintains that life is as she wants it to be.

Wanda's passion represents a fight against reality, similar to the combat which a child on a sandcastle wages against the rising tide.

Night after night, Warna awaits her lover, made up and dressed in her finest clothes.

Ernevelde returns, but only to tell her that she is old and ugly and that he can stand her no more. So the countess has him murdered, which is the only way for her to keep the illusion on which her life depends.

THE CITY IN FULL SAIL

Paris has not yet discovered Paul Willéms — but then it took the capital of French literature a long time to discover Ghelderode. Elsewhere however, especially in Germany and Austria, he is regarded as one of the most important contemporary playwrights. Several of his plays were first performed in German, Vienna, Berlin or Cologne, before being shown in their original language, or otherwise they were premiered simultaneously.

The most recent proof of the esteem in which European drama circles hold this Belgian playwright, lay in the award of the Marzotto Prize for 1966. This important prize is open to all European playwrights, and is awarded by a jury consisting of theatrical producers and directors from countries all over Europe. In 1966 it went to Paul Willems for «*La Ville Voilée*» (The city in full sail).

What is *«La Ville à voile»*? After eight plays about the enchantment of youth, this, like *Warna*, is a meditation on the disenchantment of middle age. Paul Willems explains this work as follows:

“The idea came to me in Antwerp, one day when there was a storm. The clouds rolled across the harbour. The city looked to me like some gigantic boat, with the clouds for sails. It is the story of a poor child that has to sleep out. At the age of fifteen he leaves town determined to make his fortune and then to return to buy the objects he covets in a second-hand shop. Thirty years later, he returns, a

rich man. He says that there was a keeper has received it used to be. But has life. The O satisfy him. He

This means that comes victory play was first Theatre in 1966

OTHER NAME _____

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rich man. He buys the whole shop. Sensing that there was money to be made, the shopkeeper has reconstituted the shop window as it used to be. But time has gone by. And so it is no longer the same shopkeeper. The objects he coveted no longer satisfy him. He is a disappointed man».

This means defeat, but out of this defeat comes victory for youth and its dreams. The play was first performed by the National Theatre in 1968.

OTHER NAMES, OTHER TITLES...

We have discussed a number of writers whom we believe to be significant. But there are many others too, and several of them would merit closer examination, if space were not so short.

Most Belgian authors like writing for the theatre. Most of their plays find their way into production, either by a regular theatre, an avant-garde company or by groups such as the brave «Théâtre d'Essai» of Roger Avermaete and José Nicaise, whose aim it is to stage hitherto unperformed Belgian plays.

Below, in the first place, are the names of a few actor-writers: Raymond Gerôme : «Obéron», 1949; «Mauve et le Jitterbug», 1951; André F. Daufel : «Le Satyre du XVIII-ième» (The Satyr of the XVIII-ième in Paris) 1951; «La Dent et Eve» (A Dam and Eve) 1952; «Bâti sur le

sable» (Built on the sand) 1952; Jacques Philippet : «Marie du rêve» (Mary of dreams) 1951; Frédéric Latin : «Le Jabbawock» (1965); Michel Fasbender : «Bienvenue, Mister John!» (Welcome Mr. John!) 1966; Marcelle Dambremont : «Les Feux de la rampe» (Footlights); José Brouwers : «Poisson vole» (Leapfrog) 1964.

One name that should not be forgotten is that of André Frère, who is the author and sole interpreter of the «Comédies à une voix» (Comedies for a single voice).

Journalists and critics have also been tempted to write for the stage: Jean Blondel : «Nous n'avons plus de souvenirs» (We have no more memories) 1946; Guy Van Zandycke : «Ardeurs du sang» (Ardour of the blood) 1952, «Trépas à discrétion» (Death unlimited) 1956; Jean Welle : «Castor et Pollux» in collaboration with François Mennes, 1958; «La montre en or» (The gold watch) 1956 and «Fêtons Grand-Mère» (Let's fête Granny) 1959 in collaboration with Philippe Toussaint; «Ulysse de rien» (Ulysses of nothing at all) 1954; Jean Sigrid : «Les beaux Gestes» (Handsome gestures) 1950; «L'Homme à la branche» (The man with the branch) 1951; «Pitié pour Violette» (Pity for Violet) 1953, etc.; Jean Francis : «Willem van Saeftinge», «Dallas», «22 November 1963», 1966, etc.

Poets too: Jean de Coune : «Le Ballet du pauvre soldat» (The ballet of the poor soldier) 1957; and Liliane Wouters : «Oscarine ou les Tournesols» (Oscarina or the sunflowers) 1966. Other writers still: Marcel Falmagne : «Jeanne aux fers» (Saint Joan in irons) 1964; Wim Gérard : «Le commandant d'El Alamo» (The Commander of El Alamo) 1964; René Rongé : «La

folle du logis» (Imagination) 1953; Charles Cordier: «*Le Prince Ali*» (Prince Ali) 1962; Maurice Mousenne: «*La Vieille à la lampe*» (The old woman with the lamp) 1961; Yvan Dailly: «*J'ai bien l'honneur*» (The honour is mine) 1962; Françoise Catteau: «*Vive la petite Catherine*» (Long live young Catherine) 1965; Philippe Darel: «*Le Wurflitzer*» 1964; Jean Louvet: «*L'An Un*» (The Year one) 1964; Alain Germoz «*Les Résidus*» (The residue) etc... etc.

There has also been a fascinating dramatic adaptation by Lucien Binot of «*Châlet 1*», the work of the novelist André Bailion (L'Étève 1968).

Works by several of these writers — Jean Francis, Charles Cordier, Alain Germoz, Jean Louvet — have been performed in other countries too.

SPECIALIZED WRITERS

Lastly, the names of some authors who are making a novel contribution to the theatre.

There is, for instance, the highly specialized field of plays for children. Arthur Fauquez (born in Antwerp in 1912) has won some outstanding successes in this difficult genre. His works are not only appreciated by young Belgians, but have been translated into many other languages and have been performed in France, in Germany, in England, in the United States, Spain, Italy, Yugoslavia, etc. Arthur Fauquez first began writing for the theatre during the war, for the puppets of the «Comédiens Routiers Belges». In 1946 he wrote his first play for flesh-and-blood actors, a version of «*Robinson Crusoe*» that was first staged by the Little Theatre of the «Palais des Beaux-Arts» in Brussels. During the same year this same company staged «*Les pommes d'or*» (Golden apples).

In 1955, Fauquez became the regular playwright of José Géral's «Théâtre de l'Enfance» (Children's Theatre). In addition to revivals of the previous plays, they performed «*Ambrosio tue l'heure*» (Ambrosio kills the time) 1955 «*Le Roman de Renart*» (Tale of Reynard the Fox) 1958; «*La Bombe de Zapato*» (Zapato's bomb) 1964.

His «*Don Quichotte de la Manche*» (Don Quixote of La Mancha) has so far been published only in German (Eastern Germany) and in English (U.S.A.).

Arthur Fauquez has the rare gift of enthral-

audiences because his plays which concern social problems are built around interesting plots, and are in a very original style.

Maurice Lambin, the monthly «*Scène*» (Mary of the people) the Mons Theatre «*Divin*» (A sense of the divine) to a musical score by Jean Louvet, 1949. Theatre, 1949. remembered for «*Pageot Josse*» (Pageot performed in the church of the church of the municipality.

The works of the different types varied, and he (Valet of death) be hired to be (Paris, Théâtre des de Bard) relates how injured at the gunner who poche, 1955 (The return by Boccaccio) «*Psyché*» the Théâtre by Kinde to foreign radio (Killarney)

audiences between the ages of 6 and 12 with plays which contain not a trace of infantilism, are built around captivating and well constructed plots, and are presented in pure but lively style.

Maurice Lambilliotte, who is the director of the monthly «Synthèses», has written two socially significant plays, «*Marie du Peuple*» (Mary of the people), which was produced at the Mons Theatre in 1949, and «*Le Sens du Divin*» (A sense of the divine), which is linked to a musical score by René Defossez (Monnaie Theatre, 1949). But above all he will be remembered for the magnificent «*Jeu de Saint-Josse*» (Pageant of Saint-Josse) which was performed in the open, in the square in front of the church of Saint-Josse-ten-Node, to commemorate the millennium of this Brussels municipality.

The works of Edmond Kinds are extremely varied, and he has successfully tackled many different types of play. «*Le Valet des Songes*» (Valet of dreams) is the story of man who can be hired to play a part in his clients' dreams (Paris, Théâtre de l'Humour, 1953); «*Deux verres de Barbera*» (Two glasses of Barbera) relates how an ex-serviceman, who was badly injured at Tobruk, sets off in search of the gunner who maimed him (Paris, Théâtre de Poche, 1955); «*Le retour de Frère Philippe*» (The return of Friar Philip) is based on a tale by Boccaccio (the new Rattachion theatre, 1959); «*Psyché malade*» (Psyche is ill) was shown at the Théâtre d'Essai in 1965. Many other works by Kinds have been broadcast by Belgian and foreign radio stations: «*Killarney philanthrope*» (Killarney the philanthropist) is the story of a

sensitive millionaire, whose relatives have a paper specially printed for him, containing nothing but good news (1958); «*Les moineaux de Baltimore*» (The sparrows of Baltimore) relates how needy students paint sparrows yellow in order to sell them as canaries (1959); «*Les Tambours d'airain*» (Bronze drums) is about the siege of Khartoum, defended by General Gordon (1964), etc... etc... Several plays by Edmond Kinds have been translated into English, German and even Slovenian.

Gérard Prévot is one of Belgium's best novelists and poets. His play, «*Le Matin capital*» (Capital morning) is in fact a long monologue of vigorous acidity and corrosive violence. He first performed it himself, at the National Theatre Festival in Spa in 1961, giving an extremely convincing performance of the only role in the play, both in the dramatic and the lighter moments. Another play by this poet of the theatre, «*La Mise à Mort*» (The killing), a new interpretation of the character of Don Juan was presented by the «Centre Dramatique de Wallonie» in 1964.

Charles-Louis Paron, who travelled so extensively in Eastern Europe and in Asia, and who wrote the well-known novel «*Zvradko le cheval*» (Zvradko the horse), used one of the episodes in this book as the basis for an extremely effective play «*Le Cheval dans la cuisine*» (The horse in the kitchen) which was presented by the «Théâtre de l'Equipe» in 1947. It describes the hard life of the peasants in the Save valley of Yugoslavia.

Last but not least, there is Paul-Aloïs De Bock. He is the author of the novel «*Chemins de Rome*» (Roads of Rome) and of the short story

«*Terres basses*» (Lowlands) which won the Rossel Prize in 1954. He is also a highly original playwright. His first play «*Les Fourmis*» (The Ants) — which was performed by the National Theatre in 1953 and published under the title «*Les Mains dans le vide*» (Hands in a void) — is a transposition of the life and death of a man whom the writer knew well, the German Communist leader Edgar André, who was beheaded by the nazis. It is a kind of funereal hymn to a hero whose merit was not at first recognized either by his family or his entourage, but who acquired a new dimension in death. «*Litanies pour les Géants*» (Litanies for the Dead), staged by the «Comédie de Paris» in 1959, is a harsh portrayal of a war caused at some time in the future through the conquest of an imaginary Plateau of Pamir.

Lastly, we should mention a strong and sneering farce, «*Monologue conjugal*» (Conjugal monologue), which has been performed by the Antwerp Pocket Theatre. The works of Paul-Aloïs De Bock have been translated into Dutch, Polish and German.

* * *

This is where our survey ends.

What is the conclusion ?

That the theatre is doing well in Belgium. It has a large and amazingly enlightened following. Nevertheless it is still a difficult art. To overcome these difficulties, courage, enthusiasm and dedication are needed on the part of producers, actors, directors, decorators, musicians and technicians of every kind. Not to omit the playwrights.

The State too has a part to play. It does so by granting the theatre aid on a generous scale but still less than in several neighbouring countries. This, however, is a different tale...

A tale which, like all good tales — and none finer than in the theatre — is bound to have a happy ending.

LUC ANDRÉ



LUC ANDRÉ
1917. Started
joined the
pany where
the Belg
1964. For
grammed
perform
Drama



RADIO PLAYS

«Le Chevalier d'Harmental»; «Les Trois Mousquetaires», «Vingt ans après» and «Le Vicomte de Bragelonne» (after the series by Alexandre Dumas about the three Musketeers), in collaboration with Yvan Dailly.

TELEVISION

«L'irrésistible M. Van Tromp» (The irresistible Mr. Van Tromp) after R.L. Stevenson; «Jane Eyre» after Charlotte Brontë; «Le Roi Pahaut» (King Pahaut) in collaboration with Francis Domingue; «Le Général Le Charlier».

PRINCIPAL ADAPTATIONS

FOR THE THEATRE

«The raven» by Carlo Gozzi; «The mistakes of a night» by Oliver Goldsmith; «The rainmaker» by Richard Nash; «Harvey» by Mary Chase; «Time and the Conways» by J.B. Priestley; «Dear «I killed the Count» by Alec Coppel; «Dear liar!» by Waterhouse and Hall; «This lady is for burning!» by Dario Fo.

PLAYS FOR THEATRE

«The soldier with the flint», a children's play after Andersen; «Le Forcat» (The convict) after the Comtesse de Ségur; «Le harnais sur le dos» (Harness on the back) after the principal theme in a novel by Julien Segnaire; «Les Dieux du sang» (Gods of blood) and «Tournebroche» (Turnspit) in collaboration with Michel Fasbender.

LUC ANDRÉ, born in Charleroi, on 30 June 1917. Studied Law at Brussels Free University. Joined the «Comédiens Routiers Belges» company when it was founded in 1935. A member of the Belgian National Theatre from 1945 to 1964. For this company he is still writing programmes and introductions for special school performances. Documentary work for the Drama Service of the Belgian Television.

APPROVED AND SUBSIDIZED THEATRES

Dutch language

Koninklijke Nederlandse Schouwburg
Comedieplein, 2000 Antwerpen
Jeugdteater
Vlaammarkt 28, 2000 Antwerpen
Reizend Volksteater
Arenbergstraat 28, 2000 Antwerpen
Fakkelteater
Mutsaertstraat 4, 2000 Antwerpen
E.W.T. — Randstadteater
Cogelsplein 46, 2100 Antwerpen
Mechels Miniatuurteater
O. L. Vrouwstraat 64, 2800 Mechelen
Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg
Lakensestraat 146, 1000 Brussel
Beursschouwburg
Aug. Ortsstraat 22, 1000 Brussel
Brussels Kamertoneel
Aug. Ortsstraat 22, 1000 Brussel
Waltra Teater
Arduinkaai 2-3, 1000 Brussel
Nieuw Vlaams Toneel — Schoofjeugdteater
Groenlaan 2, 1640 St.-Genesius-Rode
Nederlands Toneel Gent
St.-Baatsplein 7, 9000 Gent
Arcateater
Hoogpoort 42, 9000 Gent
Volksteater Vertikaal
Merelbekestraat 33, 9220 Merelbeke
Nieuw Nederlands Toneel
Hofstraat 77, 9000 Gent
Teater Antigone
Zwevegemstraat 7, 8500 Kortrijk
Korrekeider
Kraanplaats 9, 8000 Brugge
Groot Limburgs Toneel
Lenculenstraat 31, Maastricht

French language

Théâtre de l'Alliance
rue du Conseil 39, 1050 Bruxelles
Théâtre de l'Ancre
chaussée de Charleroi 90, 6060 Gilly
Théâtre de l'Art
rue Bodenbroeck 22, 1000 Bruxelles
Théâtre de l'Esprit-Frappeur
rue Josaphat 28, 1030 Bruxelles
Théâtre de l'Etuve
rue de l'Etuve 23, 4000 Liège
Théâtre Royal des Galeries
Galerie des Princes 6, 1000 Bruxelles 4
Théâtre du Gymnase
Place Lambert 22, 4000 Liège
Théâtre de l'Ile-St-Louis
rue des Eperonniers 5, 1000 Bruxelles
Théâtre Molière
Square du Bastion 5, 105 Bruxelles
Théâtre National
Centre Rogier, 1000 Bruxelles
Théâtre Royal du Parc
rue de la Loi 3, 1000 Bruxelles
Théâtre de Poche
1A, Chemin du Gymnase, Bois de la Cambre,
1050 Bruxelles
Théâtre de Quat'Sous
Grand-Place 16, 1000 Bruxelles
Rideau de Bruxelles
rue Ravenstein 23, 1000 Bruxelles
Théâtre des Rues
rue Potagère 52A, 1030 Bruxelles
Cie Claude Volter
no fixed address

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